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The Roles of Fathers' Involvement and Coparenting in Relationship Quality among Cohabiting and Married Parents

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Abstract

Relationship quality often declines following the birth of child, likely reflecting in part the shift towards role traditionalization that occurs through gender specialization. The current study used longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, an urban birth cohort in 2000 consisting of structured interviews of mothers and fathers who were followed over 5 years ($n=1275$), to examine whether low levels of fathers' involvement and coparenting, two indicators of role traditionalization, were linked to negative trajectories of mothers' and fathers' relationship quality for couples whose first child was born in marriage or cohabitation. We carefully consider union transitions in the 5 years postpartum by including between-subjects variables indicating that the parents were continually married, continually cohabiting, were cohabiting at the child's birth and got married after, or were cohabiting or married at the child's birth but subsequently separated. As anticipated, both fathers' involvement and coparenting were positively associated with parents' reports of relationship quality, more so for mothers than for fathers and especially for cohabiting mothers, buffering the decline in mothers' and fathers' relationship quality that typically accompanies the birth of a child. These findings underscore the importance of the father role, not only for the well-being of the child (as we know from other research) but also for the relationship of the parents. Fathers should be encouraged and supported to take an active role in parenting through educational programs and public policy (e.g., paid paternity leave).

Keywords

Coparenting; Father involvement; Fragile families; Parenting; Relationship quality; Union transitions

Relationship quality tends to decline after the birth of a child, and more so for women than for men (see Mitnick et al. 2009, for a review). An extensive literature on changes in relationship quality following childbirth encompasses several dimensions of relationship quality, including global relationship quality, relationship supportiveness, adjustment,

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Compliance with Ethical Standards This research uses secondary data without identifiers. It was reviewed by the Human Subjects Review Board at BGSU and given Exempt status as it is not considered research with human subjects.

stability, and satisfaction. Although we draw on research about all of them for our review and are careful to discuss the findings in reference to each distinct dimension of relationship quality, in the present study we examine trajectories of global relationship quality.

Gender roles often become more traditional as mothers spend more time in childcare and housework and less time in the paid labor force whereas men do the opposite (Baxter et al. 2008), which has been termed “role traditionalization” (Cowan et al. 1985). Men in the United States are now taking on a more engaged role in parenthood than in the past. It stands to reason then that if fathers are more involved with their child and work together with the mother to parent the child, these couples’ parental roles may be less traditional and ultimately benefit relationship quality, particularly for mothers. Although there is some evidence in the literature to support this logic, whether these factors operate similarly by union status of parents (i.e., married versus cohabiting) has not been adequately explored, particularly when there is a transition in the union type (e.g., from cohabitation to marriage or separation). Fathers’ involvement is advantageous for wives’ marital adjustment after the birth of a child (Levy-Shiff 1994), and coparenting is associated with reduced odds of separation following a birth among cohabiting couples (McClain and DeMaris 2013). Fathers’ involvement and coparenting may matter more for cohabiting couples than for married couples (Hohmann-Marriott 2011). In the United States, nearly one-quarter of births are to cohabiting parents, and cohabiting unions tend to be marked by poorer relationship quality (Brown and Booth 1996) and higher levels of instability (Brown 2005).

Unlike married couples, cohabitators do not have any legally binding commitment and thus acts of symbolic commitment by their partner, such as fathers’ involvement and coparenting, may be more salient to their relationship quality. Moreover, cohabitators are typically less traditional than marrieds (Brines and Joyner 1999) so higher levels of fathers’ involvement may be expected by cohabiting mothers. Low levels of fathers’ involvement may erode the quality of the coparenting relationship and thus have a greater impact on parents’ perceived relationship quality among cohabitators than it would for marrieds.

Using data from heterosexual married and cohabiting couples from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study (Fragile Families), we examine trajectories of relationship quality for both mothers and fathers over the 5 years postpartum using dyadic hierarchical linear modeling with person-period data. Our model includes an indicator for time, a set of between-subjects indicators for union status/transition (continuously married, continuously cohabiting, cohabiting to married, or separated/divorced/multiple transitions over the 5 years postpartum), as well as all the sociodemographic controls available in the dataset—namely mother’s education (Carlson and Högnäs 2011; Cherlin 2010), father’s age (Carlson and Högnäs 2011), child’s gender (Ellerbe et al. 2014; Lundberg 2005), child’s low birth weight and current health (Schmeer 2011), mother-father dyad race (Bratter and King 2008; Hofferth 2003; Osborne et al. 2007), and labor force participation (Volling and Belsky 1991). These controls have been associated with relationship quality, fathers’ involvement, coparenting, and/or union status.

The results of our analyses provide separate intercepts, slopes, and coefficients for mothers and fathers. Then, we investigate whether and how fathers’ involvement and coparenting

alter the trajectory of relationship quality for both mothers and fathers by adding those variables to the previous model. Additionally, we assess whether the inclusion of fathers' involvement and coparenting leads to a larger change (from Model 1 to Model 2) in relationship quality for continuously cohabiting mothers and fathers and parents who separate than it does for continuously married or cohabiting-to-married mothers and fathers. Our study draws on the role traditionalization framework to examine how fathers' involvement and coparenting shape men's and women's appraisals of their relationship quality after the birth of a child, not just in marriage but also in cohabitation and across union transitions.

In the United States (where the studies outlined here take place unless otherwise noted), there is typically a decline in marital quality after the birth of a child. However, a large proportion of new parents do not experience a decline in marital satisfaction (Don and Mickelson 2014) and about 18 % actually report an increase in satisfaction (Cowan and Cowan 1995). The husband's expression of fondness for his wife and their relationship and the husband's and wife's high awareness of each other and their relationship at the beginning of the marriage resulted in stable or increased relationship satisfaction for the wife over the transition to parenthood. However, husband's negativity toward his wife, his disappointment in the marriage, or the wife or husband describing their lives as chaotic was associated with a decrease in wives' satisfaction (Shapiro et al. 2000). Paternal support is positively associated with mother's relationship satisfaction (Don and Mickelson 2014).

Stably cohabiting parents and cohabiting parents at birth who transition to marriage experience the same trajectory in relationship supportiveness as do stably married parents in the 9 years following a child's birth. Only those cohabitators at birth who subsequently separate experience a steeper decline in relationship supportiveness compared to the other groups (Carlson and VanOrman 2013). These results mirror those of Howard and Brooks-Gunn (2009) who show that initial levels of supportiveness at birth are no different between married and cohabiting couples. Yet these studies do not address the role of fathers' involvement and coparenting in relationship quality trajectories for mothers and fathers.

Role Traditionalization and Transition to Parenthood

Gender-role attitudes become more traditional across the transition to parenthood, and the shift is more pronounced for mothers than fathers and for first-time than experienced parents (Katz-Wise et al. 2010). New mothers tend to decrease their participation in the labor force and increase the time spent in housework and childcare while there is little change or a decline in housework for fathers and an increase in labor force participation (Baxter et al. 2008; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003). For women in particular, this change in gender dynamics is associated with a decrease in relationship quality (Cowan et al. 1985; Twenge et al. 2003). Two key indicators of role traditionalization are fathers' involvement and coparenting, both of which are on the rise. These indicators may help to account for the varying trajectories in relationship quality observed following the birth of a child.

Fathers' involvement and coparenting may help to minimize the typical drop in relationship quality that often accompanies the transition to parenthood. According to the role

traditionalization hypothesis, if men are more involved fathers and engage in coparenting, there may be less gendered role specialization and perceived unfairness (Dew and Wilcox 2011) and therefore a smaller decline in relationship quality, particularly among women. Whereas the parenting role is deeply rooted in mothers' self-identity, it is less firmly established for fathers. Men are now much more involved in childrearing than in the past, but there remains considerable variation in fathers' roles. Couples may have to negotiate their expectations for fathers' involvement and coparenting, which can generate tension and stress that ultimately undermines relationship quality (Don et al. 2014). Some research indicates that disagreement about parenting can be particularly consequential for fathers' relationship quality. When couples disagree about parenting, mothers often impose gatekeeping which can lead to decreased relationship satisfaction among fathers (Don et al. 2013; Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2008). In fact, fathers' involvement is lower when couples report conflictual coparenting than disengaged coparenting (Waller 2012).

Fathers' Involvement

Fathers' involvement encompasses engagement, accessibility, and responsibility (Lamb et al. 1987). A large literature indicates that fathers' involvement is linked to child well-being, but its role in the well-being of parents is less clear—in part because relationship quality is usually conceptualized as an antecedent to fathers' involvement. Some studies find that relationship quality has a positive effect on fathers' involvement (Bonney et al. 1999; King 2003; Volling and Belsky 1991) whereas others find that it has a negative effect (Goth-Owens et al. 1982; Nangle et al. 2003). Still others show that there is no association between relationship quality and fathers' involvement (McBride and Mills 1993; Woodworth et al. 1996). Research from several European countries supports the idea that when fathers are highly involved with their children, wives are more satisfied with their marriages (Kalmijn 1999; Romito and Saurel-Cubizolles 1999). Thus, fathers' involvement should be positively related to relationship quality for mothers and fathers alike, although the linkage is likely more pronounced for mothers.

Coparenting

The coparenting relationship describes the “ways that parents and/or parental figures relate to each other in the role of parent” (Feinberg 2003, p. 96). The quality of the coparental relationship refers only to aspects of the relationship involving children and parenting (Feinberg 2003), however, its connection to the overall relationship of the couple cannot be ignored (Maccoby et al. 1990; McHale et al. 2000). We conceptualize coparenting (and fathers' involvement) as a predictor of relationship quality. Parents who agree about how to raise their child, respect each other's rules, and offer support and encouragement in times of stress may feel more like a team (Don et al. 2013). When parenting responsibilities are shared and parents are supportive of each other in the parental role, each partner presumably benefits more from the positive aspects of parenting (e.g., enjoying time with the child, bonding with the child, feeling confident in their role as parent) and suffers less from the negative aspects (e.g., stress, lack of sleep). Having someone with whom to share the responsibilities of parenting should buffer some of the stress of becoming a parent and taking care of a child, thus resulting in higher levels of relationship quality for the parents.

Effective coparenting is positively related to greater fathers' involvement (Waller 2012). Perceived parenting agreement is associated with greater relationship satisfaction for mothers, but not for fathers (Don et al. 2013), underscoring the centrality of gender. This pattern aligns with prior research documenting the salience of the parenting role for mothers' identity and well-being (Katz-Wise et al. 2010; Maurer et al. 2001; Umberson et al. 1996).

Union Type and Transitions

Cohabitation is a common childrearing context in the United States. A majority of unmarried births occur to cohabiting parents, not single mothers. In fact, one in four children born today are to two biological cohabiting parents. Roughly 60 % are born to married parents (Manning et al. 2015). Cohabiting unions are characterized by lower levels of relationship quality (Brown and Booth 1996; Nock 1995) and relatively short duration (Brown 2003). Children born to cohabiting parents are five times more likely to see their parents separate than are children born to married parents (Osborne et al. 2007).

Fathers' involvement and coparenting are protective against separation among cohabitators (McClain 2011). Fathers' involvement is actually highest when couples are continuously cohabiting or transition from cohabitation at birth to marriage within 5 years, followed by couples who are continuously married. Involvement is lowest among cohabiting and married couples who separate (McClain and DeMaris 2013). Similar to fathers' involvement, coparenting is also more common among cohabiting than married parents (Hohmann-Marriott 2011). These patterns align with our expectation that fathers' involvement and coparenting are more salient for the relationship quality of cohabitators than marrieds.

Cohabiting and married parents differ on key sociodemographic characteristics that are related to fathers' involvement and coparenting as well as to relationship quality and stability. Cohabitators are economically disadvantaged compared with marrieds, which is associated with their greater union instability. Marrieds are more likely to be White, have higher levels of education and income, be employed full-time, and are less likely to have children from previous unions (Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007; Manning and Brown 2006). Additionally, child low birth weight (Datar et al. 2010) and poorer health (Lundberg 2005) are positively associated with partner instability and negatively linked to fathers' involvement. Fathers' age is important because cohabiting fathers are often younger than married fathers, and fathers' age is inversely associated with fathers' involvement, coparenting, and relationship stability (Carlson and Högnäs 2011). Maternal education is closely tied to union type and stability. College-educated mothers are disproportionately married whereas less educated mothers are especially likely to be cohabiting. Maternal education is positively related to union stability, reflecting the greater resources that the more educated typically enjoy (Cherlin 2010). Fathers' involvement tends to be higher among more educated mothers, but coparenting does not vary by maternal education (Carlson and Högnäs 2011).

Furthermore, fathers are typically more involved with sons than daughters, although some studies find no difference by child gender (Ellerbe et al. 2014). The presence of a son is

associated with reduced odds of divorce among marrieds (Lundberg 2005). Poor child health is more common in cohabiting than in married families (Schmeer 2011). Low birth weight or poor child health can place a strain on relationships and increase the risk of union dissolution (Reichman et al. 2004). White couples are especially likely to be married whereas Hispanic and Black couples disproportionately cohabit (Bratter and King 2008; Osborne et al. 2007) and experience poorer relationship quality (Brown 2000). Fathers' involvement varies by race-ethnicity with Black and Hispanic fathers exhibiting greater responsibility for their children than do White fathers (Hofferth 2003). Minority couples more often engage in coparenting than do White couples (Carlson and Högnäs 2011), and fathers typically are more involved (Ellerbe et al. 2014). Fathers in dual-earner couples tend to be more involved with their children than their counterparts in single-earner couples are, but this may undermine couple relationship quality (Crouter et al. 1987; Nangle et al. 2003; Volling and Belsky 1991).

The Current Study

Much of the decline in quality experienced by new mothers could be alleviated by fathers' involvement and coparenting which could help to offset the tendency toward role traditionalization. Now that many U.S. couples have egalitarian relationships prior to birth, this shift to more gender-traditional roles might be especially difficult, undermining relationship quality. We examine whether fathers' involvement and coparenting are positively associated with relationship quality among new parents, particularly mothers. We also situate our examination of these dynamics in the context of the relationship status of the biological parents.

There are several notable features of our study. It improves on prior research by incorporating time-varying measures of both fathers' involvement and coparenting, which are unique constructs (Hohmann-Marriott 2011). Our dynamic measure of fathers' involvement captures the shifting nature of involvement based on child's age. We rely on both mothers' and fathers' reports where possible whereas most studies only use mothers' reports. Our focus is not restricted to stable couples. We include couples who experience a union transition, which is important because children born to cohabiting parents are at greater risk of parental separation by their third birthday than children born to marrieds (Osborne et al. 2007).

We hypothesize that fathers' involvement and coparenting are positively associated with relationship quality among heterosexual couples (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, these associations should be more pronounced for mothers than for fathers (Hypothesis 2) because mothers tend to take on more of the "burden" of parenthood, therefore, involved fathers may reduce some of that weight and lead mothers to feel more supported by their partner. We also assess whether fathers' involvement and coparenting have greater buffering effects for cohabiting than for married couples or cohabiting couples who marry (Hypothesis 3a). Among cohabitators, fathers' involvement and coparenting could be a sign of commitment to the family (Hohmann-Marriott 2011)—which married couples already have by virtue of being married—that may result in heightened relationship quality. Couples who separate are expected to experience larger buffering effects compared with those who remain in a

relationship (Hypothesis 3b) given the challenges that must be overcome to effectively parent outside the context of a romantic relationship. Again, we expect that women experience more positive benefits across union types than do men (Hypothesis 3c). Our analyses include controls for factors associated with fathers' involvement, coparenting, union type, and relationship quality: father's age, mother's education, child's gender, low birth weight, child's health, father-mother dyad race, and labor force participation.

Method

Participants

For the current paper, we used data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (Fragile Families). Fragile Families is representative of the 2000 birth cohort in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000 ($N= 4,898$). Mothers were first interviewed within 48 h of giving birth and the father was interviewed in the hospital or as close to the birth as possible. Every effort was made for both mothers and fathers to be re-interviewed when the child was 1, 3, and 5 years-old. (See Reichman et al. 2001 for a detailed description of the data collection process.) This dataset was ideally suited to test our hypotheses for three reasons. First, non-marital births were oversampled by a factor of five, thus allowing for an analysis of a large number of cohabiting couples. Second, observation began within a few days of the child's birth. There was no opportunity for direct father involvement with the focal child or the establishment of a coparenting relationship at the baseline interview (time 0). Third, utilizing a multivariate dyadic growth curve approach, relationship quality over time [from time 1 (child's first birthday), not time 0, to time 5 (child's fifth birthday)] can be modeled as a function of fathers' involvement and coparenting over time for mothers and fathers simultaneously while taking into account that mothers and fathers were nested in couples.

Our analytic sample was limited to mother/father pairs (i.e., heterosexual couples) in which the father was interviewed at least once, the focal child was the first child for one or both parents, and parents were either married or cohabiting at the child's birth. These limitations resulted in a sample of 1,275 couples, of which 845 were cohabiting and 430 were married at the child's birth. Data were then converted to person-period (not couple-period) format, which resulted in 7,650 person-periods.

There were no significant gender differences in education, $F(1,7645) = 2.22, p = .137$; however, married fathers and mothers had a higher average level of education than cohabiting parents, $F(1, 7645) = 1816.03, p < .001$. Cohabiting fathers and mothers were more concentrated in less than high school (37 % each, $n = 309$ and $n = 316$, respectively) or high school degree ($n = 307$ or 36 % of fathers; $n = 260$ or 31 % of mothers) groups than either the some college ($n = 183$ or 22% of fathers; $n = 230$ or 27 % of mothers) or college degree ($n = 46$ fathers, $n = 38$ mothers or 5 % each) groups. Conversely, married fathers and mothers are more concentrated in these higher education groups ($n = 167$ or 39 % of fathers; $n = 189$ or 44 % of mothers have a college degree and $n = 124$ or 29 % of fathers; $n = 107$ or 25 % of mothers have some college education) rather than in the lower education groups ($n = 55$ or 13 % of fathers; $n = 60$ or 14 % of mothers have less than a high school degree and $n = 84$ or 20 % of fathers; $n = 74$ or 17 % of mothers have a high school diploma). On average, fathers are 27 years-old at the child's birth ($SD = 6.47$) and mothers are 25 years-old ($SD =$

5.72), a significant difference, $t(1274)=148.96, p<.001$. Married parents are about 5 years older than cohabiting parents, $t(1273)=-13.15, p<.001$. Note that fathers' education and mothers' age were not included in our analyses (due to multicollinearity with the spouse/partner value on the corresponding variable) but are shown here for descriptive purposes. Boys compose 51 % ($n=429$) of focal children for cohabiting parents and 54 % ($n=234$) for married parents. Fewer children born to married parents are born underweight ($n=29$ or 7 % versus $n=88$ or 11 %), $t(1230)=2.12, p=.03$, and more are reported to be in excellent health (71 % versus 66 %), $t(6168)=-3.71, p=.0002$.

Among married couples, 39 % ($n=167$) are White, 17 % ($n=72$) are Black, 19 % (81) are Hispanic, 7 % ($n=30$) are of another racial group, and 18 % ($n=79$) are interracial. Among cohabitators, only 17 % ($n=146$) are White, 34 % ($n=287$) are Black, 30 % ($n=256$) are Hispanic, 2 % ($n=15$) are of a different racial group, and 16 % ($n=139$) are interracial. The race distributions between marrieds and cohabitators are different, $\chi^2(4)=120.59, p<.001$. A majority of married (52 %) and cohabiting (51 %) parents both work full-time. For 35 % of cohabiting dyads and 37 % of married dyads, only the father works full-time; for 8 % and 6 % of cohabiting and married dyads, respectively, only the mother works full-time; and for another 7 % (cohabiting) and 5 % (married) neither parent works full-time.

Measures

Multiple imputation is used to handle missing data for all variables using PROC MI and MIANALYZE in SAS. Most variables had less than 20 % missing; in many cases, much less. The highest amount of missing data (union status/transition) was 33 %. Data are Missing At Random (MAR), and the multivariate models include variables that are associated with missingness. Multiple imputation is the best method to handle missing data and, in fact, 33 % is not considered large in this technique. Auxiliary variables were used in the multiple imputation process (Enders 2010).

Relationship Quality—Our single dependent variable was relationship quality, measured at three different times. At Times 1, 3, and 5, mothers and fathers were both asked, “In general, would you say that your relationship with [FATHER/MOTHER] is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?” Responses were coded from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). All parents in our analytic sample were asked this question at each wave, even if they were currently separated or divorced.

Father Involvement—At each wave, mothers and fathers were asked to report the number of days per week (0–7) the father did each of a number of tasks, such as reading books, playing with toys, or feeding the child (Cronbach alphas at each time ranged from .81–.87). The specific items changed across the waves to be developmentally appropriate; only the four items (sings songs/nursery rhymes, reads stories, tells stories, and plays inside with toys such as blocks or Legos) were consistent across waves. To make use of the full range of fathers' involvement items (8 items at Time 1; 13, at Time 3; 8, at Time 5), we standardized mother- and father-reported fathers' involvement at each wave, which is consistent with prior research (Cherlin et al. 1998; McClain and DeMaris 2013). Standardization was done

after multiple imputation so that any missing data did not bias the mean and standard deviation (Lloyd et al. 2013).

Coparenting—Mothers only were asked, on a scale from 0 (*never true*) to 3 (*always true*), “How often: does [father] act like a father you want for your child?; Can you trust [father] to take good care of your child?; Does [father] respect your schedule and rules?; Does [father] support you in raising your child; Can you talk about problems with parenting with [father]?; and Can you count on [father] for help?” These six items were summed to obtain a Mother-Reported Coparenting Score (range 0– 18) in which higher scores indicated higher levels of coparenting ($\alpha_s = .79-.85$).

Union Status and Transitions—Fragile Families constructs the biological parents’ union status at the beginning of each wave using a series of questions about their current relationship status and living arrangements. These reports typically are obtained from mothers’ interviews (unless the mother’s report is missing, then the father’s report is used if available). We used that indicator to construct a categorical variable signifying whether the parents were (coded 1) married, (2) cohabiting, (3) visiting, or (4) nonromantic at each wave. Then we created a set of between-subjects dummies to indicate stability or transition over the 5-year observation period. The four categories were: (a) continuously married (reference); (b) continuously cohabiting; (c) cohabiting to married; and (d) separated, divorced, or experienced multiple transitions with the other parent.

Father and Mother Characteristics—Each parent self-reported their highest level of education at baseline. Dummy variables were created indicating whether the father (mother) had less than a high school degree, a high school diploma or equivalent (reference), some college or technical training, or a college degree or above at the time of the child’s birth. Because mothers’ and fathers’ education were highly correlated ($r = .63$), we only included mothers’ education in the multivariate models. Fragile Families constructed fathers’ age in years at baseline, which is included in the analyses. Only fathers’ age is included because mothers’ and fathers’ ages were highly correlated ($r = .70$).

Child Characteristics—Gender of child was taken from the mother’s baseline survey: (coded 1) boy or (0) girl. Fragile Families constructed a variable indicating whether the focal child was low birth weight: (coded 1) low-birth weight, (0) normal weight. At each wave, fathers were asked about their child’s overall health, ranging from 1 (*very poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). Due to the skewed distribution, we created a time-varying dummy indicating fathers’ reported health of the child as excellent (coded 1) or less than excellent (0). Fathers’ reports were used instead of mothers’ reports because fathers’ perception of their child’s health may be more important to their level of involvement than mothers’ reports.

Dyad Characteristics—Fragile Families constructed a race variable based on questions of racial and ethnic background from which we created dummies to indicate that the parents were both non-Hispanic White (reference), non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, of another racial/ethnic background, or the parents were from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. At each interview, mothers and fathers were asked to report the number of hours worked per week at their current or most recent job. We created a set of time-varying labor force participation

dummies to indicate whether both mother and father worked full-time (reference), father only worked full-time, mother only worked full-time, neither mother nor father worked full-time.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Married at birth fathers ($M=4.16$, $SE=.98$) and mothers ($M=4.00$, $SE=1.08$) reported a higher level of relationship quality than cohabiting fathers ($M=3.54$, $SE=1.21$) and mothers ($M=3.37$, $SE=1.31$), on average over time, $t(5970)=-7.32$, $p<.001$, $d=.18$. The difference between cohabiting fathers and mothers was statistically significant, $t(3837)=-5.71$, $p<.001$, $d=.19$, as was the difference between married fathers and mothers, $t(2131)=-4.35$, $p<.001$, $d=.18$.

Average father involvement was standardized in subsequent analyses; however, here the unstandardized averages are shown. Note that cohabiting ($M=3.74$, $SE=1.65$) and married ($M=4.10$, $SE=1.43$) mothers reported lower average levels of father involvement (in days per week) than did cohabiting ($M=4.25$, $SE=1.48$) and married ($M=4.44$, $SE=1.29$) fathers. The difference between cohabiting mothers and fathers was statistically significant, $t(3665)=-9.79$, $p<.001$, $d=-.32$, as was the difference between married mothers and fathers, $t(2160)=-5.80$, $p<.001$, $d=-.25$. Mothers reported a relatively high level of coparenting ($M=15.44$, $SE=3.44$ for cohabiting mothers; $M=16.39$, $SE=2.73$ for married mothers; range 0 – 18) on average across time. The difference between cohabiting and married mothers was not significant. Cohabiting parents reported lower levels of fathers' involvement and coparenting than did married parents.

About 28% ($n=280$) of the sample was continuously married, 12% ($n=116$) continuously cohabiting, 16% ($n=159$) transitioned from cohabitation to marriage, and 44% ($n=428$) exited a marital or cohabiting union. Of those who were married at their child's birth, 81% remained married over the 5-year observation period and 19% ($n=64$) experienced a divorce. Of those cohabiting at birth, just 18% remained in a stable cohabiting union, 25% married, and 57% ($n=364$) experienced a separation. Thus, 43% of cohabiting parents were in stable unions over the observation period.

Parallel Trajectory Models

Dyadic multivariate hierarchical linear models (HLM) are employed to examine the trajectory of relationship quality for both fathers and mothers simultaneously over the 5 years following the birth of a child. The results are shown in Table 1. The intercepts and slopes are modelled as random effects, and the sociodemographic characteristics of the father, mother, child, and dyad are controlled in all models.

Model 1 examines the differences between fathers and mothers by union status and transition and is the baseline model that shows how the hypothesized variables are associated with fathers' and mothers' trajectories of relationship quality over time when added in Model 2 (see Table 1). In Model 1, mothers' reported relationship quality is slightly higher than fathers' at Time 1 and declines by .06 and .09 units for fathers and mothers,

respectively, per year. This decline supports prior literature that shows there is typically a decline in relationship quality over time, although we would have expected mothers' reported relationship quality to be lower than fathers'. There is no difference in relationship quality between continuously married and cohabiting-to-married fathers or mothers. However, continuously cohabiting fathers reported lower levels of relationship quality than continuously married (-.31) and cohabiting-to-married (-.26) fathers. Continuously cohabiting mothers reported lower levels of relationship quality than did continuously married mothers (-.21) but they were no different than cohabiting-to-married mothers. Fathers and mothers who separated reported lower levels of relationship quality than continuously married fathers (-1.09) and mothers (-1.27), continuously cohabiting fathers (-.78) and mothers (-1.05), and cohabiting-to-married fathers (-1.04) and mothers (-1.17).

Most control variables were not associated with relationship quality for fathers (see Table 1). Fathers' age, mothers' education, and child's gender and low birth weight were not associated with father- or mother-reported relationship quality. Fathers reported a higher level of relationship quality when their children were in excellent health (.12) but that relationship was not significant for mothers. Race was not a significant variable for fathers. Fathers in interracial relationships were not significantly different from White fathers but they did report significantly lower levels of relationship quality than did Hispanic fathers (-.16). Mothers in interracial relationships reported lower levels of relationship quality than did White (-.26) and Hispanic (-.19) mothers. No other racial contrasts were significant for mothers. Finally, when mothers were the only one to work full-time, fathers reported lower levels of relationship quality compared to fathers in which both partners worked full-time (-.14). No other labor force participation contrasts were significant.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 posits that fathers' involvement and coparenting will be positively related to relationship quality. To test this hypothesis, fathers' involvement and coparenting were added in Model 2 of Table 1. The inclusion of both variables decreased the intercept for mothers more than for fathers. The slope for time became more shallow for both parents but more so for mothers (-.09 to -.04) than for fathers (-.06 to -.04). Both fathers' involvement and coparenting were positively associated with relationship quality for both fathers and mothers, supporting Hypothesis 1. The coefficient for fathers' involvement was larger (.22) than the coefficient for coparenting (.07) for fathers. The two coefficients did not differ for mothers (.19). This pattern indicates that fathers have better relationship quality when they are spending more time in activities and care of their children (i.e., fathers' involvement) whereas mothers' relationship quality is higher when fathers spend time with their children and effectively coparent.

Hypothesis 2, drawing on the role traditionalization hypothesis, proposed that the associations between relationship quality and fathers' involvement and coparenting will be greater for mothers than fathers. As an additional test, we conducted the theta technique (DeMaris et al. 2013; result not shown) with Model 2 to determine if the coefficients for fathers' involvement and coparenting were statistically different between mothers and fathers. This test showed that they were different, which provides support for Hypothesis 2.

Although mothers and fathers both benefit from fathers' involvement and a positive coparenting relationship, the association is greater for mothers.

Comparing the results from Model 1 to Model 2, there is some evidence to support Hypothesis 3. Recall the argument that cohabiting couples (Hypothesis 3a), particularly mothers (Hypothesis 3b), might be more sensitive to acts of commitment to the family and therefore may benefit more from fathers' involvement and coparenting than do married couples. The differences between fathers who were married continuously or transition to marriage with continuously cohabiting fathers still exist and remain essentially unchanged from Model 1. However, the differences between mothers in those three groups was no longer statistically significant, indicating that fathers' involvement and coparenting level the playing field for cohabiting mothers. Thus, there is partial support for Hypothesis 3a and full support for Hypothesis 3b. Continuously cohabiting fathers are not benefitting much from involvement and coparenting in terms of their assessments of their relationship quality but cohabiting mothers are.

Additionally, couples who separate may benefit in their assessments of their relationships from fathers' involvement and coparenting given the difficulty of parenting outside the romantic context (Hypothesis 3c). Mothers and fathers who separate, divorce, or experience multiple transitions with the other parent still reported lower relationship quality than all three of the other groups although, with the inclusion of fathers' involvement and coparenting, the differences were smaller (some coefficients are reduced by half) than they were in Model 1. Thus there is support for Hypothesis 3c. We would expect relationship quality differences between those who are in any romantic relationship and those who separated at some point; however, the inclusion of father involvement and coparenting in the model dramatically reduces those differences.

As for the control variables, there are a few differences from Model 1 to Model 2 (see Table 1). College educated mothers had higher relationship quality than did high school educated mothers (.17) and mothers with less than a high school education (.18; results not shown). Both mothers and fathers benefitted when their child was in excellent health. Race differences between mothers became more pronounced with the inclusion of father involvement and coparenting. Black mothers (-.22), Hispanic mothers (-.13), and mothers in interracial relationships (-.18) reported lower levels of relationship quality than did White mothers. Hispanic fathers reported better relationship quality than did Black fathers (.18). No other race contrasts for mothers or fathers were significant. Labor force participation was not associated with relationship quality for mothers but it was for fathers. Fathers had lower relationship quality when only mothers work full-time than when they both work fulltime (-.19) or when only the father worked full-time (-.15); however, fathers had higher relationship quality when neither parent worked full-time than when the mother only worked full-time (.25).

Discussion

Continuously married and cohabiting-to-married heterosexual mothers and fathers experience the highest levels of relationship quality over other parents. Continuously

cohabiting parents report lower relationship quality than do their counterparts who are continuously married or who transition from cohabitation to marriage, however net of fathers' involvement and coparenting, continuously cohabiting mothers do not differ from mothers in those two groups. Mothers and fathers who separate or experience multiple transitions with the other biological parent experience the lowest levels of relationship quality. Fathers' involvement and coparenting exhibit positive associations with relationship quality for mothers and fathers, although the association is stronger for women overall, cohabiting women, and parents who experience a separation. These findings are robust; characteristics of the father, mother, child, and dyad exert relatively little influence on the associations discussed here.

Overall, our results support the notion that fathers' involvement and coparenting may reduce the negative effect of having a child on relationship quality, more so for mothers than for fathers and for mothers who cohabit or separate than for other mothers. Pregnancy and childbirth can be difficult for women, and it may take several months for new mothers to heal physically and emotionally after the birth. Support and help from their partner likely matters tremendously for mothers' overall sense of well-being. For cohabiting mothers, who do not have the legal commitment of marriage, acts of investment by fathers through involvement and coparenting can buffer the decline in relationship quality such that they do not report significantly lower levels of relationship quality than continuously married or cohabiting-to-married women. These results highlight the importance of couple dynamics and in particular the role of fathers in the trajectory of both women's and men's relationship quality over the life course.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although our study identifies the key roles of fathers' involvement and coparenting in the trajectory of relationship quality after the birth of a child for mothers and fathers in various union statuses/transitions, it also has a few limitations. First, Fragile Families is most representative of fathers who are involved with their children; therefore estimates of fathers' involvement (and coparenting) may be upwardly biased. Future data collection from a sample of *men*, rather than a sample of *births*, may better represent fathers with a wider range of involvement with their children. Second, our measure of overall relationship quality is based on a single item; however, we know that relationship quality is a multidimensional concept; therefore, future research should aim to use additional measures of relationship quality. Third, we measured coparenting only from mothers. It cannot be determined here how fathers feel about the coparenting relationship and how their assessments are associated with relationship quality. Future efforts to understand fathers' perspectives on coparenting would be fruitful. Finally, we measured relationship quality, fathers' involvement, and coparenting for the first time at time 1 (the child's first birthday); however, the steepest decline in relationship quality occurs between time 0 (at the child's birth) and time 1. Fathers' involvement and coparenting may have an influence on relationship quality in the first year, however, that cannot be examined with our data and is a limitation future research should work to address.

Beyond addressing limitations of the current study, future research should consider how fathers' involvement, coparenting, and relationship quality are linked to children's developmental and educational outcomes. Additionally, it would be worth investigating whether there is an intergenerational transmission of father involvement, coparenting, and relationship quality by examining offspring's own expectations and experiences with partnering and parenting in young adulthood.

Practice Implications

The findings of the current study have practical implications for new parents and those who want to be parents in the future, as well as those who are concerned about parenting such as therapists/counselors, instructors, activists, and policymakers. Given that (a) roles become more traditional after the birth of a child and are associated with a decline in relationship quality and (b) father involvement and coparenting buffer the decline in relationship quality for new parents, potential parents and new parents need to communicate about what they expect from each other. Findings from our study could inform couples' discussions about the roles each partner will take in parenting as well as in the paid labor force and in housework. Ideally they will form a plan to work together to maintain a quality relationship, which ultimately could help to stabilize the union following the transition to parenthood.

Labor, childbirth, and newborn care and safety classes, such as those offered by hospitals, should include a parenting and relationship component that emphasizes the importance of shared parenting and cooperative coparenting for the well-being of the couple's relationship and their child. Therapists and counselors can use this information when working with their clients to help identify whether the distribution of labor at home and/or the parenting dynamics may be contributing to couples' relationship discord or reduced well-being on the part of one or both individuals.

Finally, activists and policymakers should be concerned with the (lack of) structural supports to help new parents adjust to their parenting role and to encourage participation in parenting by both mothers and fathers. The United States lags behind most developed countries in its family leave policies for parents. Proponents could use this research to support arguments in favor of maternity and (especially) paternity leave so that both parents can share childcare responsibilities, work as a team to parent children, and make parenting decisions together from the start. Laying that foundation early may level the parenting playing field so that mothers do not feel the undue burden of parenting and fathers feel like they are equal partners in parenting. Additionally, fathers who join in on parenting tasks early may feel more confident in that role, which is associated with their continued involvement in the future (Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2008). This research also provides insights for marriage promotion, a key policy initiative in recent years, by showing that encouraging parental involvement by both parents may strengthen existing relationships. Although father involvement and coparenting may not directly encourage marriage (McClain 2011), they do enhance the stability of the couple's relationship. They also enhance well-being among parents, regardless of whether they stay together or break up.

Conclusions

Our study provides numerous contributions to the literature. First, the current study examines the trajectory of relationship quality from the child's birth until their fifth birthday for both mothers and fathers. Ours is one of the first known studies to examine the trajectory of relationship quality among fathers, in addition to mothers. Second, our research focuses on cohabiting couples as well as married parents. Cohabitation is its own stage in the life course, and there has been a dramatic increase in children born to cohabiting parents in the United States. Furthermore, cohabitators tend to exhibit a lower level of relationship quality than do marrieds; therefore an examination of the trajectory of their relationship quality after the birth of a child and the factors associated with that trajectory is particularly fruitful. Third, our research examines not only stable union statuses but also union transitions over time. Cohabiting relationships are rather unstable so that an examination of couple dynamics without consideration of union transitions would give a biased picture of these processes. Fourth, the role of fathers' involvement on relationship quality after the birth of a child has only been examined in a couple of studies and only with married parents. Coparenting has not been examined at all in these processes but we show that it is consequential, particularly for mothers. Therefore, the current study contributes to the existing literature by examining the roles of fathers' involvement and coparenting on the trajectory of relationship quality of married and cohabiting parents who remain together or experience a disruption. Fifth, by using parallel trajectory models (dyadic HLM), mothers' and fathers' trajectories are examined simultaneously. This method takes into account the interdependency between dyads given that individuals are nested in parent dyads.

Our study demonstrates that when new fathers play an integral role in childrearing, the couple's relationship quality is enhanced. Fathers' involvement and coparenting are positively associated with relationship quality after the birth of a child, especially for cohabiting mothers. This linkage holds for both women and men, but is more pronounced for women, which is in line with the role traditionalization hypothesis. The typical decline in relationship quality after a birth is diminished for mothers and fathers alike when fathers are involved in the care of their child and work cooperatively with the mother to coparent the child.

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Table 1
 Dyadic HLM of Father and Mother Relationship Quality Trajectories from Time 1 to Time 5

Independent variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Trajectory				
Intercept	4.32 ***	4.52 ***	3.02 ***	1.17 ***
Time ^a	-.06 ***	-.09 ***	-.04 ***	-.04 ***
Father involvement ^d (standardized)			.22 ***	.19 ***
Coparenting ^e (range 0–18)			.07 ***	.19 ***
Between-subjects union transitions				
Continuously married	–	–	–	–
Continuously cohabiting	-.31 ***	-.21 *	-.33 ***	-.13
Cohabiting to married	-.07	-.09	-.09	-.06
Separate, divorce, or multiple transitions	-1.09 ***	-1.27 ***	-.79 ***	-.58 ***
Father characteristics				
Age at birth (range 16–53)	.00	.00	.00	.00
Mother characteristics				
Less than high school	-.09	-.07	-.06	-.01
High school	–	–	–	–
Some college	.07	.04	.09	.08
College	.15	.17	-.12	.17 *
Child characteristics				
Child male	.01	.07	.01	.07
Low birth weight	-.01	.06	-.02	.03
Child in excellent health ^d	.12 *	.08	.10 *	.09 *
Dyad characteristics				
Race				
Both White	–	–	–	–
Both Black	-.05	-.11	-.09	-.22 ***
Both Hispanic	.09	-.07	.08	-.13 *

Independent variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Both other racial/ethnic group	.03	-.01	.02	-.04
Interracial	-.07	-.26***	-.03	-.18**
Labor force participation ^a				
Both full-time	—	—	—	—
Father only full-time	-.04	.00	-.06	-.03
Mother only full-time	-.14*	-.04	-.19***	-.10
Neither full-time	.00	-.09	.06	-.01

Time 1 = child's first birthday; Time 3 = child's third birthday; Time 5 = child's fifth birthday. *N* = 1,275; Observations = 7,652

^aVariable is time-varying

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

*** *p* < .001