



Trajectories of relationship supportiveness after childbirth: Does marriage matter?



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ABSTRACT

Relationship quality for married couples typically declines after the birth of a (first) child, as parenthood brings new identities, stresses, and responsibilities for mothers and fathers. Yet, it is less clear whether nonmarital relationship quality follows a similar trajectory, particularly given the greater selectivity of nonmarital relationships that persist over time. This paper uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ($N = 3,459$) with latent growth curve models to examine relationship quality (measured by mothers' perceived supportiveness about fathers) for married and unmarried couples over nine years after a child's birth. Findings suggest that marriage at birth is protective for relationship supportiveness over time, net of various individual characteristics associated with marriage, compared to all unmarried couples at birth; however, marriage does not differentiate supportiveness compared to the subset of unmarried couples who remain stably together. Also, unmarried couples who *get* married after the birth have more supportive relationships compared to all unmarried couples who do not marry—though less so when compared to couples who remain stably together.

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1. Introduction

The transition to parenthood represents a major life event in which a couple must—both individually and together—negotiate extensive personal, familial, social, and often professional changes. Since the publication of LeMasters' article "Parenthood As Crisis" (LeMasters, 1957), a vast literature has documented how having a baby changes the lives of married couples—typically, a decrease in positive interchange, an increase in conflict, and a decline in satisfaction (Belsky and Kelly, 1994; Cowan and Cowan, 1992; Glenn and McLanahan, 1982; Gottman and Notarius, 2000; Michaels and Goldberg, 1988). This occurs because of the strains, stresses, and sources of conflict, as parents adjust to their new caregiving roles, responsibilities, and routines—and the gender differentiation therein—amidst depleted resources of time and energy (Cowan et al., 1985; Cowan and Cowan, 1992). Some research has tempered the general findings about declining marital quality after childbirth, suggesting that such decline is not unique to the transition to parenthood but also a function of marital duration (McHale and Huston, 1985; Umberson et al., 2005) and depends on various other individual and couple characteristics (Doss

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et al., 2009). In any case, it remains clear that childbirth represents a significant event in the lives of married couples and brings a decline in relationship quality for many.

Since the 1960s, a declining share of children has begun life with married parents, and fully 40% of all births now occur outside of marriage (Hamilton et al., 2016). At least in the U.S., unmarried parents are quite different from married parents – typically, unmarried parents are young, economically disadvantaged, and often have unstable relationships (McLanahan, 2011). Although over four-fifths of unwed couples are in a romantic relationship at the time of a new baby's birth, including half living together (McLanahan et al., 2003), only about one-third are living together five years later (McLanahan, 2011). Yet, there has been limited attention to the trajectories in relationship quality for unmarried couples with children and whether/how such may differ from those of married couples (but see Howard and Brooks-Gunn, 2009; for an exception). This topic is important because it sheds light on the nature of contemporary family roles and relationships outside of marriage—and also points to the ongoing place for marriage as a social institution that may (or may not) strengthen couple relationships and ultimately increase family stability and the wellbeing of children. Understanding whether and how marriage matters for couple relationships can also provide information salient to recent policy initiatives designed to strengthen relationships among unmarried parents which have, unfortunately, met with little success (Wood et al., 2012, 2014).

This paper uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the level and change in couple relationship quality (measured by mothers' reports of fathers' supportiveness) over nine years subsequent to an urban birth in the late 1990s for couples who were in a romantic relationship at the time of birth. Using latent growth curve models, we explore how marriage matters for relationships among couples who were legally married, unmarried cohabiting, and dating (but living apart) at the time of birth in two ways: First, we examine whether nine-year trajectories in supportiveness differ by marital status at birth, and if so, whether any differences by marital status can be accounted for by individual or couple characteristics. As such, we extend Howard and Brooks-Gunn (2009) by following couples over a longer period of time, using a more detailed perceived supportiveness measure, and directly incorporating relationship stability in our multivariate estimates. Second, we analyze whether marriage *after* a nonmarital birth is associated with an increase in perceived supportiveness, compared to cohabiting couples (at birth) who do not marry; to our knowledge, this has not been done in prior work for unmarried parents after a birth. An innovation of our approach is to include all romantically-involved (at birth) couples in the analyses (married, cohabiting, dating)—not just those who stayed together as in prior work. To the extent that marriage is associated with both relationship stability and relationship quality, limiting the analyses to only those couples who remain together could lead to biased estimates of the effect of marriage. By simultaneously accounting for relationship instability and relationship quality (supportiveness), we can more accurately estimate how marriage may shape trajectories of relationship quality.

2. Previous research

2.1. Trajectories of relationship quality after childbirth

Life course theory highlights that lives are lived in a social context and that “linked lives” in the form of dyadic relationships affect individual well-being (and other relationships) over time; individuals experience trajectories, or long-term pathways in various domains, which can be altered by transitions, or discrete life changes or events (Elder, 1994, 1998). Among family ties, the marital relationship has historically been viewed as central to nuclear family dynamics (Cummings and O'Reilly, 1997), is a key aspect of the adult life course (Umberson et al., 2005), and is linked to various domains of adult well-being (Proulx et al., 2007; Wickrama et al., 1997). As noted above, the trajectory of marital quality typically declines with the transition to parenthood (Belsky and Rovine, 1990; Belsky and Hsieh, 1998; Cowan and Cowan, 1992; MacDermid et al., 1990; Shapiro et al., 2000), although not all couples become less satisfied with their marriages during this transition—there is significant variability (Belsky, 1986; Belsky and Rovine, 1990). In particular, the extent to which spouses can (re)negotiate their roles and protect their time together may help preserve marital quality (Dew and Wilcox, 2011; MacDermid et al., 1990).

We might expect even greater declines in relationship quality after childbirth for unmarried couples as compared to married couples. Marriage represents a significant legal and personal commitment between two persons and has historically been highly ‘institutionalized’ as the primary context for childrearing (Cherlin, 2004, 2005). The legal status, clearer norms and expectations about family roles and responsibilities (for both nuclear and extended families), as well as the “enforced intimacy” (Nock, 1995) or “enforceable trust” (Cherlin, 2004) within marriage, circumscribe the so-called ‘package deal’ in which partner and parent roles co-occur (Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991; Townsend, 2002). Also, the nature of the marriage contract facilitates greater specialization (between market and household work) of husbands and wives, decreases uncertainty about the future, and encourages couple-specific investments, as compared to unmarried cohabitation where equality—but uncertainty—prevails (Brines and Joyner, 1999; England and Farkas, 1986). We might thus expect that the more ‘institutionalized’ nature of married relationships would help protect relationship quality from declining as much or as rapidly amidst the stresses of caring for a new child as compared to unmarried couples.

Most of the research about unmarried couples has focused on cohabiting couples, and we know little about couples who are romantically involved but living apart (which we refer to as ‘dating’ couples). Cross-sectional research comparing the quality of relationships for married and cohabiting couples in general (regardless of the presence of children) suggests that cohabiting couples have lower-quality relationships than married couples: Cohabitors report lower levels of happiness and

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