UNION DISSOLUTION IN FRAGILE FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

Most parents who have children outside of marriage are cohabiting or romantically involved when their child is born. By the child's fifth birthday, however, over half of these relationships have ended. What causes unmarried parents to end their relationships? Previous qualitative research suggests that unmarried couples more often attribute their breakups to the low quality of their relationships, such as infidelity or abuse, or to partners' negative behaviors, such as incarceration or drug use, while economic conditions are more important reasons for entry (or lack of entry) into marriage. We find support for this hypothesis using nationally representative longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. We find that economic characteristics predict transitions into marriage among unmarried parents, but they are not associated with relationship dissolution. Instead, the strongest predictors of relationship dissolution among unmarried parents are low relationship quality and fathers' demonstrated relationship commitment prior to the birth.   This contrasts with patterns among married parents, where divorce is quite sensitive to economic conditions.

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The increasing willingness of poor women and men to have children outside of marriage has convinced many Americans that they no longer care about marriage. Local churches, community groups, states, and even the federal government are now taking steps to "restore the culture of marriage" in America. All 50 states have at least one program or demonstration with this aim in mind, though no one knows yet how successful they are (Ooms, Bouchet and Parke 2005). The most significant of these efforts are targeted at poor unmarried parents.

Have poor single mothers (and the men who father their children) abandoned the marriage norm? The answer to this question depends somewhat on whether you believe their words or their actions. Resent research reveals that unmarried parents value marriage, and hold an almost idealized view of the institution (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin, Kefalas and Reed 2004; Gibson 2007; Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan 2006). When interviewed just after their child is born, two thirds of mothers and 75 percent of fathers believe it is better for children if their parents are married. And their plans for their relationships at the time of their child's birth reflect this view, as more than 80 percent say they are romantically involved, nearly three quarters say there is at least a fifty-fifty chance they will marry each other, and over half say that the probability that they will marry each other is either good or certain (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2007; 2002).

Yet despite what poor unmarried parents say, what they do is a different story. Only 16 percent of all couples who share a nonmarital birth are married by their child's fifth birthday, while over 60 percent are no longer romantically involved (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2007). Since unmarried parents are more than four times as likely to break up as to marry, the causes of relationship dissolution among unmarried parents should be a topic of significant scholarly concern. Yet survey researchers have been surprisingly slow to address this question (for exceptions, see Carlson, England, and McLanahan 2004; Osborne, Manning and Smock 2007).[1]

However, new qualitative work has offered intriguing hypotheses on the topic. In-depth qualitative research following unmarried couples over time has found that while economic factors figure strongly in couples' accounts of why they are hesitant to marry (Gibson, Edin, and McLanahan 2005; Gibson-Davis 2007), stories of breakup seldom feature struggles over money. Instead, those whose relationships fail point to relationship difficulties and serious personal problems as the cause (Edin, Kefalas and Reed 2004; Reed 2008; 2007). However, these qualitative studies cannot rule out the possibility that relationship problems are simply reflections of couples' economic problems.

This paper has two goals. First, we seek to test the intriguing hypothesis offered by new qualitative work—that economic factors are more strongly associated with

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[1] Carlson, England and McLanahan's analysis looks across all types of relationship transitions but is limited to the first two waves of the Fragile Families survey. Therefore, it misses almost half of the breakups that occur by year five (about 20 percent are not romantically involved at baseline, just over 40 percent at one year, and about 60 percent at 5 years) (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2007). Osborne, Manning and Smock's analysis focuses solely on dissolution and also uses the Fragile Families survey. However, there are three major differences. First, they exclude all unmarried couples who were romantically involved at the child's birth but not living together (about 30 percent of all unmarried parents at baseline), so look only at a select group of couples who could potentially breakup. .Second, they combine both unmarried parental cohabiters and married couples in their analysis, and do not consider whether factors associated with breakup differ for these two groups. Third, their analysis uses only the first three waves of the data.

transitions into marriage while relationship factors are more strongly associated with breakups, using longitudinal survey data from roughly 4,000 couples who shared a nonmarital birth between 1997 and 2000 in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.[2] Using a baseline sample of all unmarried parents who shared a nonmarital birth and who were romantically involved at baseline, we assess the degree to which economic problems, relationship quality and commitment, and serious personal problems are associated with the likelihood of marriage or breakup, looking to see whether the characteristics predicting each type of relationship transition differ.

Second it is possible that marital breakups are more sensitive to changes in couples' economic situations than breakups among unmarried parents.[3] Thus, we will also analyze the relationship trajectories of a companion sample of just over 1,000 married couple families in the Fragile Families Study who have also recently had a birth, extending the analyses by Osborne, Manning, and Smock (2007). We explore whether different factors are associated with union dissolution for married and unmarried parents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nonmarital births accounted for less than 5 percent of all births in the U.S. in 1950, but by 2000 one third of all births ware to an unmarried mother (Ventura and Bachrach 2000). Cohabitation has become an increasingly common component of nonmarital

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[2] Research on relationship transitions among new unmarried parents has primarily focused on positive relationship transitions; that is, transitions from romantic involvement to cohabitation and from either status into marriage. Using the initial waves of the Fragile Families Survey, Carlson, England and McLanahan (2004) found that transitions marriage were strongly associated with economic factors. However, relationship factors and some personal problems were also of considerable importance in predicting marital transitions. Using more waves of the survey, Gibson-Davis tested the hypothesis, derived from qualitative data (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson, Edin, and McLanahan 2005; Gibson-Davis 2007) that couples whose financial situation shows improvement over time will be more likely to marry, and found strong support for this hypothesis.

[3] We recognize that there is a very large literature on the sources of marital dissolution. Two excellent reviews of the literature are provided by Furstenberg 1990 and McLanahan 2008.

parenthood. In 2000, almost half of all nonmarital births were to cohabiting parents (McLanahan et al. 2001; Kennedy and Bumpass 2007), and between one-fourth and two-fifths of all children were expected to live in a cohabiting union at some time while growing up (Graef & Lichter 1999; Hueveline & Timberlake 2004; Kennedy & Bumpass 2007).

The increasing prevalence of children living with unmarried parents has caused concern among policymakers and some academics because nonmarital relationships are quite unstable. Using three waves of the Fragile Families Study, Osborne, Manning, and Smock (2007) found that children born to cohabiting parents were over five times more likely to experience their parents' separation than children born to married parents. There are many explanations for this instability, including the economic (Becker 1991), emotional (Waite 2000), and institutional (Cherlin 2004) benefits conferred on married couples. Family instability, in turn, has negative consequences for many dimensions of child well-being (Amato 2005; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Some parents do marry following a nonmarital birth, but these rates are quite low. This has resulted in a growing body of research examining the incentives and barriers to marriage among unmarried couples.

Marriage Entry

When asked about their relationships shortly following the birth of a shared child, more than 80 percent of unmarried parents reported that they were romantically involved, and over half said that the probability that they will marry each other is either "good" or "certain" (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2007; 2002). Unmarried parents also attach a high degree of importance to the institution of marriage (Edin and Kafalas 2005;

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Osborne 2005; Gibson-Davis 2005; Lichter Batson and Brown 2004). Yet, unmarried parents are relatively unlikely to marry following a nonmarital birth. Recent evidence from the Fragile Families Study finds that among a cohort of nonmarital children born in the late 1990s, only 16 percent of their parents have married by their fifth birthday, while over sixty percent are no longer romantically involved.

Qualitative research has found evidence that may resolve this apparent contradiction between what unmarried parents do and what they say: the high degree of symbolic value that unmarried mothers place on marriage may in fact deter them from marrying (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin 2000). They believe that they should not enter into this sacred institution until they have achieved financial stability, saved enough for a wedding and a down payment on a house, and minimized conditions that could contribute to future divorce (Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Manning and Smock 2002; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005); in short, marriage is seen as an accomplishment, rather than a starting point. Given the economic and personal challenges many unmarried parents face, this "marriage bar" may be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

This so-called economic bar to marriage has been identified in quantitative research as well, measured as a necessary threshold of income, employment, educational attainment, and asset accumulation required before a couple will marry (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Oppenheimer 2003; Osborne 2005; Smock and Manning 1997; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005). The economic bar – or, technically, nonlinearities in the association between income and the likelihood of marriage – is more pronounced for couples with low levels of education (Holland 2007). More generally,

cohabiting couples with greater economic resources and higher human capital are more likely to marry following a premarital conception (Manning 1993, 2001).

In addition to research on the economic circumstances conducive to marriage, researchers have also found that relationship quality is positively associated with getting married (Carlson, McLanahan and England 2004; Osborne 2005; Roebuck, Bulanda, and Brown, 2007). Couples with greater relationship happiness, less violence, and more anticipated stability are more likely to marry (Brown 2000, 2004b; DeMaris 2000), and these results extend to unmarried parents as well (Carlson et al.). Thus, the literature has consistently shown that a combination of economic characteristics and relationship quality predict entry into marriage among unmarried couples. What is less clear, however, is whether the conditions that predict entry into marriage are also related to chances that unmarried parents will break up.

Relationship Dissolution

Qualitative accounts of why unmarried parents break up tend to focus on negative partner behavior and low relationship quality. Unmarried parents who broke up reported higher rates of infidelity, mistrust, substance abuse, and domestic violence; infidelity and mistrust were the most common reported causes of dissolution (Reed 2007; Hill 2007). While financial and economic issues play a central role in the literature on why *married* couples divorce (Becker 1991; England and Farkas 1986), they do not play a central role in unmarried parents' accounts of why their relationships ended.

Family complexity has a strong influence on the current relationships of unmarried parents. Romantic relationships among unmarried parents with children are often quite volatile even from the beginning (Reed 2007; Hill 2007). As conception is seldom

intentional and the length of the courtship before first conception brief, the couple's

relationship is more likely to begin as a response to an unplanned pregnancy—an attempt

to build a family around a baby—than as an outgrowth of a stable relationship. Sexual

jealousy between new and old partners is a common theme (Edin, Tach, and Mincy,

forthcoming; Hill 2007). Family complexity, in terms of cohabitation and marital history,

is associated with marital instability in nationally representative datasets as well (Raley

and Bumpass 2003; Sweeney and Phillips 2004; Teachman 2004). Parents with children

from prior marital *and* nonmarital unions are more likely to experience separation than

parents with only one biological child (Carlson et al. 2004; Osborne 2005; White and

Booth, 1985). Many of these conditions which increase relationship instability predate

the union (e.g. prior fertility), rather than being caused by it.

While economic explanations play less prominent roles in unmarried couples'

accounts of why their relationships split up, it is possible that poor economic conditions

are a more distal cause of the negative relationship quality and partner behavior that do

figure into their accounts. No previous studies we know of have explicitly tested whether

this is true, nor have they examined the relative importance of economic, behavioral, and

relationship characteristics for explaining entry into marriage versus ending relationships

among unmarried *parents,* who may face a different set of stresses and constraints than

the larger population of all cohabiting and romantically involved couples.

The study that comes closest to doing this is Lichter et al.'s (2006) examination of the

likelihood of marriage versus dissolution for *all* cohabiting couples using the NLSY-1979

cohort data. The authors find that poor cohabiting women are especially unlikely to

transition into marriage, and that both women's and partners' employment predicted

marital transitions, but not dissolution transitions. Welfare receipt was also a strong disincentive to marriage. This study, however, is based on an older cohort of women, who were aged 14 - 22 in 1979; it includes all cohabiting couples rather than focusing explicitly on parents; and it does not include many of the measures of relationship quality, commitment, and behavior that qualitative studies have found in couples' own accounts of their breakups.

We build upon this analysis by focusing specifically on the population of unmarried couples of most interest to policymakers – unmarried parents – who may have a different set of factors to consider in their decisions about whether to marry or breakup than do unmarried couples without children. We also incorporate a more comprehensive set of behavioral characteristics and prior and current relationship characteristics, which qualitative evidence suggests are strong predictors of relationship dissolution. In doing so, we extend the work of Carlson, McLanahan, and England (2004) who look at union formation among fragile families within one year of a nonmarital birth.

DATA AND MEASURES

In the analyses that follow, we use four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to a) examine the economic, behavioral, and relationship characteristics that predict transitions into marriage or dissolution for unmarried parents who are romantically involved and b) compare the characteristics that explain the likelihood of relationship dissolution for married and unmarried parents. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study follows a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in 20 U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000. The study interviews mothers and fathers at the time of the child's birth and again after one year, three years, and five years. The survey contains a

large oversample of nonmarital births and, when weighted, the data are representative of all U.S. cities with populations larger than 200,000. Both the mother and father are interviewed at each follow-up, regardless of their relationship status. These data are ideal for the study of relationship dissolution because they include sizeable samples of marital and nonmarital births and they contain detailed longitudinal economic, attitudinal, and behavioral information collected independently from both the mother and the father.

At each survey wave, our analyses are based upon the subsample of the 4,898 children in the Fragile Families Study whose parents were in some type of romantic relationship at the time of birth (N = 4,245), whether it was marriage (N = 1,187), cohabitation (N = 1,784) or romantic involvement (N = 1,274). In subsequent waves we additionally restrict the sample to children whose mother responded to the survey and answered the question about her relationship with the father (N = 3,792 at 1-year survey, 3,697 at the 3-year survey and 3,592 at the 5-year survey). In our longitudinal analyses we track the relationship status of married and unmarried couples over time, so couples drop out of the sample after their relationship has ended. Table 2 summarizes the rates of relationship dissolution for married and unmarried couples over time, and we describe them in greater detail in the results section below.

Measurement

Dependent Variables. The main dependent variable in our study is the relationship status of parents with marital and nonmarital births at each survey wave. For all couples, we measure whether the parents are married, cohabiting (living together all or most of the time), romantically involved but not living together, or in no romantic relationship at the time of each follow-up interview. We classify couples with nonmarital births as those

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who were either romantically involved or cohabiting at the time of the focal child's birth. We use mothers' reports of relationship status at each survey wave because fathers have higher rates of attrition which are systematically related to relationship status.[4]

Economic Characteristics. Our measures of economic characteristics include parents' education, employment, and earnings. Mother's and father's education are measured at the time of the birth and are coded as a series of dummy variables for *less than high school*, *high school or GED*, *some college*, and *college or higher*. Mother's and fathers' *employment* are measured as dummy variable indicators at each survey wave for whether the parent reported working for pay in the week prior to the survey. Mother's and father's *annual earnings* are measured in $1,000s of dollars at each survey wave, derived from their reports of wages and weeks worked in the past year. Finally, we include measures of whether the *mother received TANF in the previous year* and whether the *mother currently receives housing assistance*. Because many of these measures are highly correlated, we conducted a principal components factor analysis on all measures of economic status. We found that mothers' and fathers' earnings and education loaded onto the same factor (see Appendix A), so we combine these measures into a single indicator that we label the "economic status scale."

Behavioral Characteristics. We also include measures of behavioral characteristics. *Father ever in jail* is a dummy variable coded 1 at each survey wave if either the father or mother reported that he had ever been in jail. For mothers, we include a dummy variable for whether she ever spent *time in a correctional facility*. We also include a dummy

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[4] In a comparison of mothers' and fathers' reports of relationship status at the 1-year follow-up (when missing data are least for both mothers and fathers), we found that mothers and fathers agreed on their relationship status in 87 percent of cases where we had information reported by both the mother and father, but part of this disparity is due to the fact that sometimes mothers and fathers were interviewed on different dates, sometimes with substantial lags of several months between their respective survey dates.

variable indicator at each wave if the *father reported using drugs* or the *mother reported using drugs*. Finally, we include *self-reported health* measures for both the mother and father at each wave, which is measured on a 5-point scale: poor, fair, good, very good, or excellent.

Relationship Characteristics. We create measures of the quality and commitment of the relationship between parents. The measure used for *relationship quality* is a four-item scale that measures how much the mother feels that the father supports her at each wave. On a scale from 1 (never) to 3 (often) mothers were asked how often the father: expresses love and affection, encourages the mother to do things that are important to her, listens to her when she needs someone to talk to, and really understands her hurts and joys. The scale was created by taking the mean of these four items, with higher values indicating higher levels of perceived emotional support. The reliability of this scale ranges from 0.60 in Wave 1 to 0.65 in Wave 3. We also create a parallel scale for fathers based on their reports; these two measures are not highly correlated ($r = 0.26$). Mothers were coded as having *experienced domestic violence* if they indicated that their child's father had hit or slapped them in the past year. This was asked at each survey wave. Unfortunately there is no question in the Fragile Families surveys asking mothers whether their partners have ever been unfaithful. We do, however, have an indicator of *mothers' distrust of men*, which is measured by the average to two items: "Men cannot be trusted to be faithful" and "In a dating relationship, a man is largely out to take advantage of a woman," which each have responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Mother's pro-marriage attitudes were measured by the average of two statements about the importance of marriage: "It is better for a couple to get married than to just live

together" and "It is better for children if their parents are married." *Mother's traditional attitudes* were measured by the average of two statements: "The important decisions in the family should be made by the man of the house" and "It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and the family." A parallel measure of f*ather's traditional attitudes* was also created using the father's responses to the same statements during the first survey wave. All of these items have responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). These measures are comparable to those used in Carlson et al. (2004).

We include a measure of whether the *couple had subsequent children* together after the birth of the focal child. We also include measures of whether the *couple had prior shared children* together before the birth of the focal child, *whether the mother had a prior child with a different partner,* and *whether the father had a prior child with a different partner*, relative to the focal child being the first child for both partners. The previous fertility measures were derived from children's birthdates given in subsequent survey waves. Finally, we include measures of relationship commitment leading up to the birth of the child, including whether the *father provided financial support* during the pregnancy, whether the *father visited the mother in the hospital*, and whether *the child was given the fathers' last name*. Factor analysis confirmed that these variables all loaded on the same factor (see Appendix A), so we combine them into a single measure of relationship commitment.

Time-Constant Controls. We measure mother's and father's race in four mutually exclusive categories: *non-Hispanic white*, *non-Hispanic black*, *non-Hispanic other race*, and *Hispanic. Mother's age* and *father's age* were measured at the time the

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child was born. We experimented with including the measures of both fathers' and

mothers' background characteristics, but mothers' and fathers' measures are highly

correlated so we include only mother's measures in our regression analyses. We also

include a dummy variable indicator for whether the *child is male*, and a dummy variable

indicating whether the mother *lived in a two-parent family* when she was a child. Finally,

we include a measure of mother's reported religious affiliation – *no religion, Catholic,*

non-catholic Christian, or *other religion*. All of these measures were taken from the

Wave 1 baseline survey administered shortly after the child was born.

ANALYSIS

We seek to answer two questions in the following analyses. First, do the same factors

that explain entry into marriage among unmarried couples also explain relationship

dissolution? While economic factors are the single largest predictor of the transition into

marriage, the previous qualitative research described above suggests that relationship

quality may be more important than economic factors in predicting the dissolution of

nonmarital unions. Second, do the economic, behavioral, and relationship characteristics

that explain relationship dissolution differ for married and unmarried couples?

To answer the first question, we restrict our sample to unmarried couples who were in

a relationship at the birth of their child (either cohabiting or romantically involved). We

then measure whether the parents have either married or ended their unions by the 5-year

follow-up survey. Each of these variables is the dependent variable in a logistic

regression equation, where our independent variables are the economic characteristics,

behavioral characteristics, and relationship attitudes and characteristics described above,

measured during the baseline survey. We experimented with estimating these models

separately for transitions that occurred by the 1-, 3-, and 5-year follow-up surveys and the

results were substantively the same so we only describe the results for the 5-year follow

up survey below. To answer the second question, we extend this analysis to the

examination of the likelihood of divorce by the 5-year follow-up survey among parents

who were married at the time of the birth.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the baseline characteristics of couples with marital and nonmarital

births. The majority of married couples (61%) are white, while the racial composition of

the unmarried parent sample is more evenly mixed between blacks (45%), whites (31%),

and Hispanics (39%). Unmarried mothers and fathers were younger at the birth of the

focal child. Over half of the married parents had had children together before the focal

child, compared to 33% of unmarried parents. Unmarried parents, however, were more

likely to have had children with different partners prior to the birth of the focal child. At

baseline, unmarried parents have less education, lower employment rates, and lower

earnings than their married counterparts. 40 percent of unmarried mothers received

welfare in the year prior to the birth of their child, compared to only 10 percent of

married couples. Among unmarried parents in relationships at the birth of the child, 63%

were cohabiting and the other 37% were romantically involved but not living together.

In Table 2, we show unmarried mothers' self-reports of the likelihood that they

will marry the baby's father, which was asked in the baseline survey shortly following

the birth. Unmarried mothers are quite optimistic about the future of their relationships,

with over 40% saying that there is 'an almost certain chance' that they will marry the baby's father. These results differ a great deal depending on the parents' relationship status, however, with cohabiting mothers reporting much higher likelihood of marriage than mothers who are romantically involved but not living with the baby's father.

In Table 3, we trace the relationship status of married and unmarried parents across the four survey waves and show what actually happened to couples' relationships following the birth. Few married couples break up during the five years following the birth of the focal child. By one year, 94% remain married, by 3 years 89% are still married. Unmarried couples' relationships are considerably less stable. Of the unmarried couples in a relationship at the time of the birth, 33% have ended their relationship by the 1-year follow-up and 11% have married. By 3 years, 47% have ended their relationships and 16% have married. Unmarried couples who were cohabiting at the birth had more stable relationships than couples who where romantically involved but not living together.

As a first step towards examining the causes of breakup, we examine mothers' self-reported reason for breakup. These results are shown in Table 4. The overwhelming majority of married and unmarried couples who break up list "relationship reasons" as the primary reason for breakup, which includes everything from "don't get along" to "too young." Relatively few list economic hardships, drug use, or incarceration as the primary causes of breakup. Of course, this measure may not be an accurate account of the conditions that cause couples to break up. First, there are many disparate reasons lumped together under the broad label of relationship issues, so this measure may not be very meaningful. Second, while "relationship reasons" may be the proximate cause of a

breakup, economic or behavioral conditions could be more distal factors that influence the quality of relationships, which in turn, influences rates of relationship dissolution.

We address these limitations in our next analysis by estimating multivariate logistic regression models predicting either transitions into marriage or transitions out of the nonmarital relationship in Table 5. In Model 1 we include couples' economic characteristics, in Model 2 we include couples' behavioral characteristics, in Model 3 we include couples' relationship attitudes and characteristics, and finally in Model 4 we include all of the variables together in a single model. All models include parents' background characteristics. Black mothers are significantly less likely to enter marriage than white mothers, while Hispanic mothers are significantly less likely to end their relationships than white mothers. Mothers who grew up in intact families, who were older at the time of the birth, and who affiliate as Catholics were all less likely to dissolve their unions, but these characteristics were not associated with an increased likelihood of marriage among unmarried couples.

In Model 1 we find some support for the notion that couples' economic conditions more strongly predict transitions into marriage than transitions out of relationships. The economic status scale, fathers' employment, and mothers' housing subsidy receipt are all substantively large and statistically significant predictors of subsequent entry into marriage. In contrast, the economic status scale is only weakly related to dissolution in this initial model, and no other economic variables are significant.

Mothers' and fathers' behaviors are included in Model 2 – measured as drug and alcohol use, incarceration, and self-reported health – had little association with

relationship transitions, with the exception of fathers' incarceration, which strongly deters entry into marriage and increases the likelihood that parents end their relationship.

Model 3 includes the measures of couples' relationships attitudes and characteristics. Mothers' pro-marriage attitudes strongly predict subsequent entry into marriage, while mother's distrust of men is a strong deterrent to marriage. None of the measures of relationship attitudes predict relationship dissolution. In contrast, couple's relationship experiences prior to the birth of the child are strong predictors of relationship dissolution. Couples are much less likely to end their unions in cases where the father showed little relationship commitment prior to the birth – whether he made financial contributions during the pregnancy, the child was given the father's last name, and whether the father visited the mother in the hospital. These factors also predict entry into marriage, but the relationship is not as strong. Finally, both mothers' and fathers' reports of relationship quality are strong predictors of relationship transitions – positive reports of relationship quality are positively associated with transitions into marriage, but negatively associated with relationship dissolution.

The results reported here for Models 1-3 remain in Model 4, which includes all of the variables from Models 1-3 together in the same equation. In this model, the economic status scale is no longer a significant predictor of relationship dissolution for unmarried couples, but fathers' relationship commitment remains a strong predictor of relationship dissolution. In subsequent analyses (not shown), we find that while cohabiting couples are less likely to end their unions than couples who are romantically involved but not living together, the causes of marriage and dissolution are similar for both cohabiting and romantically involved couples.

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These results provide some support for the predictions in the qualitative literature that economic considerations play a stronger role in predicting marriage than dissolution among unmarried couples, it is also important to note that the proportion of variance explained in these models is relatively low (R-squared < 0.13), so there is still a great deal of variation in relationship transition behavior that this model is unable to account for.

Table 6 examines the causes of relationship dissolution for married parents. It uses parents' reports at baseline, around the time of the shared birth, to predict whether the couple has broken up by the time the child was about five years old. The Models proceed in the same fashion for Table 6 as they did for Table 5. Focusing on Model 4, the full model including all variables, we see that the economic status scale is a strong predictor of divorce for married parents, and both mothers' and fathers' employment are also significantly related to subsequent divorce. This is in sharp contrast to Model 4 of Table 5 for unmarried parents, where economic status had no statistically significant or substantive association with the likelihood of relationship dissolution. Parents' behaviors have little association with divorce for married parents, but the relationship characteristics that predict breakup are the same for married and unmarried parents: low relationship quality (as reported by both mothers and fathers) predicts breakup, while couples with previous shared children are less likely to break up.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we tested the intriguing hypothesis offered by new qualitative research on unmarried parents that economic factors are more strongly associated with

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transitions into marriage while relationship factors are more strongly associated with break ups. We found partial support for this hypothesis using longitudinal quantitative data on unmarried parents from the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Study. Economic characteristics, most notably mother's education and father's earnings, predict unmarried parents' transitions into marriage, but economic characteristics have little bearing on the likelihood that unmarried parents break up. Despite the fact that these economic characteristics *are* associated with marriage, one should note their relatively modest magnitude, particularly relative to other studies (e.g. Lichter et al., 2006). In contrast, economic factors are very strong predictors of divorce for married couples.

One potential explanation for this lack of economic effects on dissolution is that unmarried parents – the focus of the present paper – are a select group of all unmarried couples, because they *chose not to marry* following a conception. It is possible that the characteristics that one would expect to be strongly predictive of a marriage *prior* to a birth are weaker in our sample since we have selected on those who chose not to marry (Carlson, McLanahan, and England, 2004). This may also explain why economic conditions are cited as important predictors of relationship dissolution for married couples, but are not for the unmarried parents in our sample. The fact that economic conditions are strongly associated with divorce for married couples also suggests that couples may continue to face an "economic bar" even after they marry.

Consistent with qualitative research, we also find that couples' relationship quality, previous fertility, and fathers' commitment to mothers during pregnancy strongly predict whether unmarried couples remain together or split up in the future. Many of these relationship characteristics – relationship quality and previous fertility – also

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predict the likelihood of transition into marriage. Many of the factors that cause instability among unmarried relationships and that deter entry into marriage actually predate the union, such as having prior children by a different partner. Self-reported relationship quality is the largest predictor of *both* marriage and breakup.

The relatively small number of divorces that have occurred after five years in our sample raises several limitations of our study. We only measure relationship dissolution within a relatively narrow five-year time frame, so we miss breakups that will occur after five years, or those that occurred prior to the birth of the child. Our results therefore apply only to a subset of the entire population of nonmarital dissolutions and we underestimate the amount of instability that children will experience over the course of their total childhood. Additionally, the Fragile Families Study does not ask about one of the key predictors of relationship dissolution identified in qualitative studies – relationship infidelity. The closest measure we have is about distrust of men in general, not about their partner specifically. We do capture the effect of infidelity or suspected infidelity to the extent that it is reflected in lower reported relationship quality among mothers and fathers, but we cannot measure its independent effect on the likelihood of breakup.

Our findings have implications for current policy initiatives designed to promote marriage for unmarried parents. Because reported relationship quality was the single strongest predictor of both marriage and dissolution, initiatives that are effective in improving relationship quality may have a noticeable impact on the stability of nonmarital unions. However, relationship quality is itself a product of many of other characteristics of partners and relationships. For example, infidelity, incarceration, and

prior multiple-partnered fertility all impact the quality of nonmarital relationships. It is unclear whether current policy initiatives designed to improve relationship quality and promote marriage will be able to improve relationship quality net of these other challenges that unmarried parents face.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics at Time of Birth for Married and Unmarried Parents

	Married Parents	Unmarried Parents
Background Characteristics		
Mother's Race		
White	61	31
Black	14	45
Other	25	23
Hispanic	27	39
Intact Family at 15	66	36
Mother's Age at Birth	29.57 (5.55)	23.75 (5.75)
Father's Age at Birth	31.87 (6.37)	27.34 (8.08)
Child is Male	62	52
Religious Affiliation		
Catholic	40	38
Non-Catholic Christian	39	46
Other Religon	12	7
No Religion	8	10
Economic Characteristics		
Mother's Education		
Less than High School	18	42
High School	25	40
Some College	21	17
College or More	36	2
Father's Education		
Less than High School	19	39
High School	21	40
Some College	26	16
College or More	32	4
Mother Employed Month Prior to Birth	33	20
Mother Received Welfare in Past Year	10	39
Mother Received Housing Assistance in Past Year	6	22
Father Employed Last Two Weeks	93	79
Mother's Annual Earnings	$15,939 (15,872)	$6,036 (8,777)
Father's Annual Earnings	$40,671 (26,257)	$18,393 (14,568)
Behavioral Characteristics		
Mother Used Drugs or Alcohol	2	7
Mother Self-Reported Health	4.05 (0.89)	3.76 (0.98)
Mother Has Ever Been Arrested	1	3
Father Used Drugs or Alcohol	2	6
Father Self-Reported Health	4.05 (0.86)	3.89 (0.89)
Father Has Ever Been in Jail [a]	5	35
Attitudes		
Pro-Marriage Attitutdes	3.13 (0.66)	2.73 (0.66)
Distrust of Men	1.88 (0.53)	2.10 (0.54)
Traditional Attitudes-Mother	2.19 (0.69)	2.09 (0.56)
Traditional Attitudes-Father	2.41 (0.66)	2.37 (0.63)
Relationship Characteristics		
Considered Abortion	1	8
Prior Shared Children	58	33
Mother has Prior Non-Shared Children [a]	14	37
Father has Prior Non-Shared Children [a]	10	25
Father Made Financial Contributions During Pregnan	-----	91
Child Given Father's Last Name	-----	88
Father Visited Mother in Hospital	96	88
Mother's Report of Relationshp Quality	2.72 (0.31)	2.66 (0.36)
Father's Report of Relationship Quality	2.27 (0.25)	2.27 (0.24)
Mother's Report of Domestic Violence	3	3
Relationship Status		
Cohabiting	-----	63
Romantically Involved	-----	37
N	1,187	3,058

Notes: Numbers in Parentheses are standard deviations. Descriptive statistics are weighted by
national sampling weights. Unmarried couples include parents who were romantically
involved or cohabiting at the time of the focal child's birth. Couples who were not in a
relationship at time of birth are excluded.

Table 2. Unmarried Mothers' Self-Reported Chance that They Will Marry Baby's Father

	Overall (N=3,035)	Cohabiting (N=1,774)	Romantically Involved (N=1,261)
No Chance	7	4	13
A Little Chance	7	4	11
A 50-50 Chance	20	15	29
A Pretty Good Chance	26	26	25
An Almost Certain Chance	40	52	22

Notes: Descrptive statistics are weighted using national sampling weights. Questions are asked at the time of the baby's birth, and are asked only of unmarried mothers who are currently in a relationship with the baby's father.

Table 3. Relationship Status by Survey Wave for Married and Unmarried Parents

	Married at Birth				Unmarried at Birth			
	Baseline	1-Year	3-Year	5-Year	Baseline	1-Year	3-Year	5-Year
Couples in Relationship at Baseline	1,187	1,071	1,052	1,012	3,058	2,721	2,645	2,580
Relationship Status (%)								
Married	100	94	89	82	------	11	16	17
Cohabiting	------	1	2	1	63	42	30	19
Romantically Involved	------	0	0	0	37	14	8	5
Not In a Relationship	------	4	9	18	------	33	47	59

Notes: Descriptive statistics are unweighted.

Table 4. Self-Reported Reasons for Breakup among Married and Unmarried Parents

	Married at Birth			Unmarried at Birth		
	1-Year	3-Year	5-Year	1-Year	3-Year	5-Year
Finances	14	3	6	10	5	4
Distance	0	3	0	5	4	5
Dad Jail	3	3	0	6	7	4
Mom Jail	0	0	0	1	0	0
Relationship Reasons	75	68	60	76	70	48
Drugs	19	5	4	4	5	8
Abuse/Violence	6	14	8	8	7	8
Other	26	27	30	24	17	31
N	36	59	53	548	405	140

Notes: Descriptive statistics are unweighted.

Table 5. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Transitions into Marriage or Dissolution following a Nonmarital Birth

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Marriage	Dissolution	Marriage	Dissolution	Marriage	Dissolution	Marriage	Dissolution
Economic Characteristics								
Economic Status Scale	0.396 ***	-0.149 *					0.323 **	-0.064
	(0.258)	(0.070)					(0.090)	(0.078)
Mother's Employment	-0.033	-0.003	-----	-----	-----	-----	-0.038	0.078
	(0.145)	(0.109)					(0.155)	(0.096)
Faterh's Employment	0.545 **	-0.171	-----	-----	-----	-----	0.388 *	-0.032
	(0.161)	(0.108)					(0.169)	(0.115)
Mom Received Welfare	-0.062	0.110	-----	-----	-----	-----	0.008	0.054
	(0.122)	(0.092)					(0.129)	(0.098)
Mom Received Housing Assistance	-0.391 *	-0.047	-----	-----	-----	-----	-0.247	-0.134
	(0.169)	(0.113)					(0.176)	(0.118)
Behavioral Characteristics								
Father Used Drugs	-----	-----	-0.627 *	0.240	-----	-----	-0.514	0.101
			(0.278)	(0.177)			(0.305)	(0.194)
Mother Used Drugs	-----	-----	-0.366	0.046	-----	-----	-0.178	-0.048
			(0.242)	(0.160)			(0.262)	(0.177)
Father Ever Incarcerated	-----	-----	-0.578 ***	0.432 ***	-----	-----	-0.245	0.327 **
			(0.122)	(0.088)			(0.133)	(0.099)
Mother Ever in Correctional Facility	-----	-----	0.038	0.315	-----	-----	0.030	0.003
			(0.346)	(0.262)			(0.385)	(0.334)
Mother's Subjective Health	-----	-----	0.033	0.002	-----	-----	-0.051	0.295
			(0.057)	(0.044)			(0.064)	(0.018)
Father's Subjective Health	-----	-----	0.032	0.072	-----	-----	-0.029	0.048
			(0.064)	(0.048)			(0.069)	(0.074)
Relationship Attitudes & Characteristics								0.053
Pro-Marriage Attitudes	-----	-----	-----	-----	0.215 *	0.009	0.190 *	0.022
					(0.086)	(0.067)	(0.088)	(0.069)
Mother's Distrust of Men	-----	-----	-----	-----	-0.122 **	0.067	-0.059	0.047
					(0.117)	(0.089)	(0.121)	(0.092)
Mother's Traditional Attitudes	-----	-----	-----	-----	0.023	-0.094	0.053	-0.077
					(0.103)	(0.079)	(0.107)	(0.083)
Father's Traditional Attitudes	-----	-----	-----	-----	0.058	-0.028	0.121	-0.019
					(0.098)	(0.077)	(0.104)	(0.081)
Relationship Quality Scale	-----	-----	-----	-----	0.293 ***	-0.131 **	0.274 ***	-0.149 **
					(0.062)	(0.043)	(0.064)	(0.046)
Mother Reports Domestic Violence	-----	-----	-----	-----	-0.175	-0.106	0.065	0.254
					(0.412)	(0.268)	(0.423)	(0.275)
Previous Shared Children	-----	-----	-----	-----	-0.124	-0.154	-0.031	-0.147
					(0.124)	(0.095)	(0.133)	(0.100)
Mother Previous MPF	-----	-----	-----	-----	-0.148 +	0.101	-0.066	0.143
					(0.128)	(0.097)	(0.135)	(0.104)
Father Previous MPF	-----	-----	-----	-----	-0.006 *	-0.056	0.045 *	-0.106
					(0.132)	(0.102)	(0.138)	(0.107)
Considered Abortion	-----	-----	-----	-----	0.131	-0.012	0.174	-0.033
					(0.219)	(0.117)	(0.224)	(0.162)
Relationship Commitment Scale	-----	-----	-----	-----	0.389 **	-0.499 ***	0.310 *	-0.494 ***
					(0.122)	(0.134)	(0.128)	(0.083)
Self-Reported Plans to Marry					0.683 ***	-0.341 ***	0.629 ***	-0.286 **
					(0.148)	(0.090)	(0.152)	(0.094)
Cohabiting at Birth					0.646 ***	-0.515 ***	0.613 ***	-0.476 ***
					(0.137)	(0.097)	(0.143)	(0.100)

{continued}

Background Characteristics								
Mother's Race								
Non-Hispanic Black	-0.769 ***	0.044 ***	-0.968 ***	0.504 ***	-0.599 ***	0.226	-0.605 ***	0.260 *
	(0.145)	(0.118)	(0.141)	(0.114)	(0.147)	(0.121)	(0.156)	(0.126)
Hispanic	0.392 *	-0.262	0.235	-0.229	0.253	-0.226	0.317	-0.131 *
	(0.168)	(0.141)	(0.164)	(0.137)	(0.168)	(0.144)	(0.177)	(0.148)
Non-Hispanic Other	-0.297	0.108	-0.364 *	0.148	-0.247	0.073	-0.277	0.052
	(0.167)	(0.145)	(0.162)	(0.141)	(0.169)	(0.148)	(0.178)	(0.153)
Child is Male	-0.014	0.056	-0.047	10.078	-0.022	0.075	-0.001	0.064
	(0.111)	(0.086)	(0.108)	(0.083)	(0.111)	(0.086)	(0.116)	(0.089)
Grew up in Intact Family	0.079	-0.217 *	0.122	-0.240 **	0.071	-0.224 *	0.049	-0.215 *
	(0.117)	(0.092)	(0.114)	(0.089)	(0.118)	(0.093)	(0.123)	(0.096)
Mother's Age at Birth	-0.004	-0.019 *	0.011	-0.020 *	0.027 *	-0.026 **	0.006	-0.025 *
	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.010)
Religious Affiliation								
Catholic	0.256	-0.359 *	0.299	-0.396 *	0.271	-0.344 *	0.153	-0.303
	(0.222)	(0.165)	(0.219)	(0.161)	(0.222)	(0.169)	(0.231)	(0.173)
Non-Catholic Christian	0.355	-0.059	0.397 *	-0.132	0.352	-0.095	0.286	-0.003
	(0.198)	(0.136)	(0.193)	(0.132)	(0.198)	(0.139)	(0.207)	(0.143)
Other Religion	1.055 **	-0.133	0.994 ***	-0.128	1.132 ***	-0.167	1.063 ***	-0.126
	(0.271)	(0.217)	(0.265)	(0.212)	(0.276)	(0.223)	(0.287)	(0.230)
Constant	-1.688 ***	0.814 **	-1.710 ***	0.323	-5.082 ***	2.564 **	-4.500 ***	1.707 **
	0.389	(0.289)	(0.455)	(0.343)	(0.624)	(0.434)	(0.795)	(0.574)
R-squared	0.07	0.04	0.06	0.05	0.12	0.10.	0.13	0.10

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Notes: All independent variables are measured at the baseline survey, except for mother's and father's incarcertaion and prior fertility.

Table 6. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Relationship Dissolution for Parents Following a Marital Birth

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Economic Characteristics				
Economic Status Scale	-0.418 ***	-----	-----	-0.483 ***
	(0.115)			(0.135)
Mother's Employment	0.466 *	-----	-----	0.478 *
	(0.227)			(0.234)
Father's Employment	-0.540 *	-----	-----	-0.675 *
	(0.289)			(0.328)
Mom Received Welfare	-0.063	-----	-----	-0.131
	(0.263)			(0.282)
Mom Received Housing Assistance	0.219	-----	-----	0.244
	(0.357)			(0.389)
Behavioral Characteristics				
Father Used Drugs	-----	-0.060	-----	-0.597
		(0.494)		(0.563)
Mother Used Drugs	-----	0.882	-----	0.857
		(0.515)		(0.543)
Father Ever Incarcerated	-----	0.363	-----	-0.156
		(0.263)		(0.305)
Mother Ever in Correctional Facility	-----	0.579	-----	0.438
		(0.845)		(0.877)
Mother's Subjective Health	-----	-0.001	-----	0.161
		(0.104)		(0.110)
Father's Subjective Health	-----	-0.244 *	-----	-0.246 *
		(0.099)		(0.111)
Relationship Attitudes & Characteristics				
Pro-Marriage Attitudes	-----	-----	-0.149	-0.114
			(0.157)	(0.151)
Mother's Distrust of Men	-----	-----	0.052	-0.036
			(0.198)	(0.197)
Mother's Traditional Attitudes	-----	-----	-0.165	-0.268
			(0.171)	(0.165)
Father's Traditional Attitudes	-----	-----	-0.016	-0.206
			(0.166)	(0.164)
Relationship Quality Scale	-----	-----	-0.452 ***	-0.451 ***
			(0.092)	(0.095)
Mother Reports Domestic Violence	-----	-----	1.113	1.480 *
			(0.648)	(0.678)
Previous Shared Children	-----	-----	-0.418 *	-0.483 *
			(0.204)	(0.202)
Mother Previous MPF	-----	-----	0.240	-0.121
			(0.255)	(0.262)
Father Previous MPF	-----	-----	0.106	0.212
			(0.267)	(0.258)
Considered Abortion	-----	-----	0.326	-0.352
			(0.583)	(0.529)
Father Visited Mother in Hospital	-----	-----	-1.060 *	-0.874 *
			(0.425)	(0.401)

{continued}

Background Characteristics				
Mother's Race				
Non-Hispanic Black	0.359	0.525 *	0.349	0.341
	(0.219)	(0.211)	(0.249)	(0.244)
Hispanic	-0.024	0.131	0.277	0.071
	(0.278)	(0.262)	(0.296)	(0.294)
Non-Hispanic Other	-0.152	-0.087	-0.433	-0.365
	(0.272)	(0.266)	(0.316)	(0.293)
Child is Male	0.011	-0.032	-0.259	-0.098
	(0.179)	(0.175)	(0.198)	(0.189)
Grew up in Intact Family	-0.428 *	-0.599 **	-0.674 **	-0.409 *
	(0.188)	(0.183)	(0.209)	(0.204)
Mother's Age at Birth	-0.072 ***	-0.095 ***	-0.112 ***	-0.083 ***
	(0.019)	(0.017)	(0.019)	(0.213)
Religious Affiliation				
Catholic	-0.652	-0.398	-0.436	-0.542
	(0.386)	(0.387)	(0.429)	(0.401)
Non-Catholic Christian	-0.469	-0.189	-0.332	-0.403
	(0.359)	(0.359)	(0.403)	(0.377)
Other Religion	-0.876 *	-0.739	-0.608	-0.651
	(0.445)	(0.444)	(0.487)	(0.468)
Constant	1.590 *	2.538 **	2.870 ***	4.515
	(0.728)	(0.799)	(0.948)	(1.121)
R-squared	0.11	0.10	0.16	0.18

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

Appendix A. Results of Principal Components Factor Analysis

A. Relationship Commitment and Quality Variables

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Uniqueness
Considered Abortion	-0.45	-0.16	0.77
Prior Shared Children	0.2	-0.59	0.68
Financial Contributions During Pregnancy	0.77	-0.07	0.41
Dad Visited Mother in Hospital	0.76	-0.13	0.41
Child Given Father's Last Name	0.71	-0.15	0.47
Mother's Report of Relationship Quality	0.36	0.61	0.51
Father's Report of Relationship Quality	0.1	0.69	0.51
Eigenvalue	2.05	1.18	

B. Economic Status Variables

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Uniqueness
Mother Worked Month Prior to Birth	0.36	0.82	0.22
Father Worked in Past Two Weeks	0.39	-0.38	0.71
Mother's Annual Earnings	0.72	0.33	0.38
Father's Annual Earnings	0.76	-0.33	0.31
Mother's Education (ordinal)	0.81	0.02	0.34
Father's Education (ordinal)	0.77	-0.16	0.38
Eigenvalue	2.62	1.04	

Appendix B. Correlation Matrix for Continuous Independent Variables and Scales for Unmarried Couples

	Mother's Age	Economic Status Scale	Mother's Health	Father's Health	Distrust of Men	Mother's Traditional Attitudes	Father's Traditional Attitdues	Pro-Marriage Attidues	Plans to Marry	Relationship Commitment Scale
Mother's Age	1									
Economic Status Scale	0.34	1								
Mother's Health	-0.02	0.18	1							
Father's Health	-0.04	0.11	0.13	1						
Distrust of Men	0.08	-0.17	-0.13	-0.04	1					
Mother's Traditional Attitudes	0.12	-0.14	-0.06	-0.04	0.29	1				
Father's Traditional Attitdues	0.02	-0.19	-0.07	-0.08	0.09	0.19	1			
Pro-Marriage Attidues	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.09	0.21	0.07	1		
Plans to Marry	-0.03	0.09	0.04	0.01	-0.19	0.04	-0.02	0.13	1	
Relationship Commitment Scale	-0.004	0.19	0.01	-0.01	-0.12	0.04	-0.04	0.05	0.33	1
Relationship Quality Scale	-0.049	0.19	0.11	0.07	-0.16	0.01	-0.05	0.03	0.35	0.18