

FATHER INVOLVEMENT, RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND TRANSITIONS OUT OF
COHABITATION THROUGH MARRIAGE OR SEPARATION

Lauren N. Rinelli

Department of Sociology

National Center for Marriage Research

Center for Family and Demographic Research

Bowling Green State University

222 Williams Hall

Bowling Green, OH 43403

lnrinel@bgsu.edu

*This research is part of my dissertation, which is funded through the National Center for Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University.

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There has been a 70 percent increase in the number of cohabitators with children since 1990 (Manning, 2001). Half of all nonmarital births are to cohabiting parents (Child Trends, 2007). Fifty nine percent of women who conceive a child within cohabitation remain in the cohabiting union after the birth (Manning, 2001) and once a child is born into a cohabiting union, parents are not likely to transition out (Manning, 2001; Raley, 2001). Parents and children typically fair worse in cohabiting unions than any other family structure (Brown, 2005). Although research has done an excellent job at documenting unmarried parents' union formation and transition patterns during conception and shortly after the birth of a child, the processes that contribute to these decisions are less well-known. What processes affect a couple's transition out of cohabitation after the birth of a child?

The United States government has allocated millions of dollars to promote healthy marriage and healthy relationships. Although these initiatives do not particularly target unmarried couples with children, unmarried parents do participate. A greater understanding of the processes that are associated with healthy relationships among parents would inform these policies' efforts in addressing the particular needs of unmarried parents, which is a contribution of this research.

In addition to the healthy marriage initiative, the government has also been interested in fathers and their involvement in the lives of their children since the Clinton era (Lamb, 2004; Marsiglio et. a., 2000). While research on fathers and their children flourished in the 1980s and 1990s, less attention was paid to the influence of fathers' involvement with their children on the relationship between mothers and fathers. Family theory has recognized that fathers' involvement is influenced by contextual factors, including the mother (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998), and that children benefit from having both parents contribute to their care (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). It is

unknown, however, whether father involvement is associated with transitions out of cohabitation among unmarried parents. This research addresses this limitation.

Perhaps the most consistent finding in research on children is that they fair better when their biological parents are married. With the large increase in children born outside of marriage, it is necessary to understand the processes associated with parents' transitions to marriage or separation so that policies directed at encouraging healthy relationships and father involvement can direct their focus. How are father involvement and relationship quality associated with transitions to marriage or separation? Does father involvement encourage marriage? These are the questions addressed in the current research.

Union Transitions among Cohabiting Parents

Observed transitions out of cohabitation in the first five years of life among children born to cohabiting parents reveal that 60 percent experienced a transition to marriage, 28 percent experienced a parental separation resulting in a single-mother household, and 12 percent remained with both cohabiting parents for the full five years (Graefe & Lichter, 1999). Furthermore, race differences in transitions out of cohabitation are similar among parents as they are among nonparents; White parents are most likely to transition to marriage, Hispanic parents are most likely to remain cohabiting, and Blacks fall in between (Graefe & Lichter, 1999; Manning & Smock, 1995). Among cohabitators in general, relationship quality and expectations are important aspects to consider in studying union transitions (Brown, 2000). The role of father involvement in transitions out of cohabitation among couples with children has not been examined. The current study will examine the role of relationship quality and father involvement in union transitions among cohabiting parents.

THEORY

Kalmijn (1999), in a study of father involvement and the perceived stability of marriage proposes two hypotheses; the investment hypothesis and the satisfaction hypothesis. The investment

hypothesis states that when fathers are involved with their children and become more attached (high levels of investment), they have more to lose if they were to divorce, therefore, there is a direct effect of father involvement on the stability of marriage. In this sense, “the family is regarded as a triangular relationship in which the bond between father and child strengthens the bond between father and mother” (pg. 411).

The satisfaction hypothesis states that men’s involvement with their children has an indirect stabilizing effect on marriage by making women happier. As women’s labor force participation increased, there was a decline in traditional gender role attitudes so women began to expect that men would do more housework and childcare (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Presser, 1994). There is a strong positive correlation between father involvement and wives reports of marital satisfaction (Harris & Morgan, 1991). Furthermore, Booth and Amato (1994) found indirect support for this relationship in the husband’s egalitarian attitudes are associated with less tension and conflict within the marriage and thus lower odds of divorce. Together, these studies show support for the satisfaction hypothesis. Indeed, Kalmijn finds that father involvement does increase marital stability. However, when wives’ marital satisfaction is included, the effect of father involvement disappears; therefore, the satisfaction hypothesis is supported because father involvement is associated with wives marital satisfaction which in turn reduces the odds of divorce.

These hypotheses can be modified for the case of cohabiting fathers. Perhaps involved fathers have an investment in their child and would want to marry to the mother as a means of stabilizing their relationship and becoming a legally recognized family. It could also be the case that the more involved fathers are with their new child, the happier the mother will be and the couple will be more likely to move into marriage. I expect that higher levels of father involvement will be associated with greater odds of transitioning to marriage and lower odds of separation. I expect that higher levels of

relationship quality will also increase the likelihood of marriage and decrease the likelihood of separation.

DATA & METHOD¹

Data from all four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (Fragile Families) are employed to investigate how are father involvement and relationship quality associated with transitions out of cohabitation during the first five years of a child's life. Fragile Families is representative of births in cities with populations over 200,000 and oversamples cohabiting couples at birth. Fragile Families is ideal to address the current research question because mothers and fathers are interviewed shortly after the child's birth and are re-interviewed at the child's first, third, and fifth birthdays. Parents are asked detailed questions about their union transitions since the previous interview, their relationship quality, father involvement, and co-parenting behaviors. For the current investigation, mothers and fathers who were cohabiting at the baseline interview (i.e., at the child's birth) for whom valid data are available for both partners for key variables are included.

The data is reconstructed to create a person-month file. The event history data will be analyzed using a discrete-time competing risks hazard model. The dependent variable is the type of transition the cohabiting parents experience (i.e., marriage, separation, or no union transition). The focal independent variables are relationship quality and father involvement/co-parenting indicators reported by both mothers and fathers. The models will also include a range of control variables such as race, mother's and father's age, education, income, and employment status, gender of the child, and child's health and temperament. Currently, I have coded the first three waves of data, am working on finishing the coding of the newly released fifth wave and will begin analysis shortly.

¹ A more detailed description of data limitations and handling of missing data are outlined in the full paper.

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