The Role of Father Involvement in the Union Transitions of Cohabitors

Father involvement is critical aspect of family life with implications for couple relationship quality (Levy-Shiff, 1994) and union stability (Spearin & Goldscheider, 2010). Yet, father involvement has been almost exclusively investigated in married families despite increasingly diverse pathways to family formation (Smock & Greenland, 2010); 40% of births occur to unmarried women (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2011), at least 60% of whom are cohabiting (Payne, Manning, & Brown, 2012). In light of the fact that more than half of cohabiting unions will end within five years (Kamp Dush, 2011), it is crucial to explore factors that may protect fragile families from relationship dissolution.

This study expands on previous work investigating the demographic and individual characteristics associated with union transitions among cohabiting parents (e.g., Hohmann-Marriott, 2009; Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006). Lichter et al. (2006) examined the union transitions of poor cohabiting women and found that transitions to marriage were unlikely and the dissolution rates were high. Hohmann-Marriott (2009) investigated links between father involvement ideals and union transitions of unmarried parents and found that relationships were more likely to end when mothers viewed fathers' caregiving as less important and when fathers were less involved in child care. Mothers who viewed fathers' caregiving as less important were also less likely to marry (Hohmann-Marriott, 2009).

Drawing from the widely used Lamb-Pleck (1987) father involvement framework, I used discrete time event-history models with a multinomial logit (Allison, 1982) to examine the competing risks of marriage or dissolution relative to remaining in a cohabiting relationship among cohabiting parents in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Engagement refers to fathers' direct interaction with children, such as playing games or talking, whereas indirect care refers to fathers' degree of responsibility for the child, excluding financial responsibility (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987).

Data and Methods

Data come from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a nationally representative, longitudinal, panel study of births to primarily unmarried women residing in large U.S. cities during the early 2000s. Parents were interviewed shortly following their child's birth and were re-interviewed when their child was 1, 3, 5, and 9 years of age. I used data from the first four interviews. The sample is limited to parents were cohabiting at birth and all subsequent years, or who reported a marriage or dissolution date at any year after Year 2 (n = 820).

Independent Variables

Engagement was measured from mother's reports using a 9-item scale at Year 1 (12-items at Year 3), and included the number of days per week (0 to 7) the father participated in activities with the child such as playing inside with toys or feeding the child. Scale items were averaged and sample alphas were α = .87 and .89 at Years 1 and 3, respectively.

Indirect care was measured from mother's reports at Years 1 and 3 from the following questions: “How often does your child’s father 1) do things like look after the child when you need to do things, and 2) take the child places they need to go, such as daycare or the doctor”, and “You can count on father for help when you need someone to look after the child for a few hours”, ranging from 1 = *often* to 4 = *never*. Items were reverse coded and averaged. Sample alphas were α = .76 and .85 at Years 1 and 3, respectively.

Dependent Variables

The primary dependent variable was an indicator of whether the mother married, dissolved, or continued to cohabit with her child's father. The observation period was measured

in years and began at the birth of the child (baseline interview) and ended at the year of the marriage or dissolution, or is censored at the last interview year.

Controls

The following time-invariant controls were included: parental age, mother race, mother education, and parental multipartnered fertility. The following time-variant controls were also included, measured at the Year prior to the event of interest: relationship quality, household size, income to poverty ratio, and residential mobility.

Results

Sample statistics and comparisons are listed in Table 1. Overall fathers were very involved with their children, and there were relatively few differences between the married, dissolved, and continuously cohabiting samples. Results are listed in Table 2. Indirect care significantly reduced the risk of dissolution relative to continuous cohabitation, and marginally increased the risk of marriage relative to continuous cohabitation. Engagement was not significantly associated with the risk of marriage or dissolution.

Discussion

Father involvement in indirect care may protect cohabiting parents from dissolution. This finding is important given high rates of dissolution among cohabiting parents (Kamp Dush, 2011; Lichter et al., 2006) that compound risks for the growing number of children born to cohabiting couples (Payne et al., 2012). Indirect care was marginally associated with marriage for cohabiting parents even after accounting for relationship satisfaction, suggesting relationship education and marriage promotion programs may be strengthened by including interventions to increase fathers' indirect care for children.

References

Allison, P. D. (1982). Discrete-time methods for the analysis of event histories. *Sociological Methodology, 13,* 61-98.

Hamilton, B. E., Martin, J. A., & Ventura, S. J. (2011). *Births: Preliminary Data for 2010*. Hyattsville, MD: National vital statistics reports web release.

Hohmann-Marriott, B. E. (2009). Father involvement ideals and the union transitions of unmarried parents. *Journal of Family Issues, 30*(7), 898-920.

Kamp Dush, C. M. (2011). Relationship-specific investments, family chaos, and cohabitation dissolution following a nonmarital birth. *Family Relations, 60,*(5), 586-601.

Lamb, M. E. , Pleck, J. H., Charnov, E. L., & Levine, J. A. (1987). A biosocial perspective on paternal behavior and involvement. In J. Lancaster, J. Altmann, L. Sherrod and A. Rossi. (Eds.) *Parenting across the Life Span: Biosocial Dimensions*, New York: Transaction.

Levy-Shiff, R. (1994). Individual and contextual correlates of marital change across the transition to parenthood. *Developmental Psychology, 30,* (4), 591-601.

Lichter, D. T., Qian, Z., & Mellott, L. M. (2006). Marriage or dissolution? Union transitions among poor cohabiting women. *Demography, 43*(2), 223-240.

Payne, K. K., Manning, W. D., & Brown, S. L. (2012). *Unmarried births to cohabiting and single mothers, 2005-2010 (FP- 12-06).* National Center for Family & Marriage Research, 2012.

Smock, P. J., & Greenland, F. R. (2010). Diversity in pathways to parenthood: Patterns, implications, and emerging research directions. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72,* (3), 576-93.

Spearin, C. & Goldscheider, F. (2010). Couple commitment, father involvement, and Divorce. Unpublished paper.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics*

	All Cohabitors		Married		Dissolved		Continued	
	M (SD)	% M	*M (SD)*	% M	*M (SD)*	% M	*M (SD)*	% M
Independent Variables								
Engagement	4.76 (1.59)	50.93	4.87[2] (1.49)	0.00	4.72 (1.59)	0.00	4.73[2] (1.63)	1.37
Indirect Care	2.42 (0.71)	50.93	2.48[1,2] (0.68)	0.00	2.34[1,3] (0.73)	0.00	2.42[2, 3] (0.72)	1.74
Control Variables								
Mother								
Relationship Satisfaction	12.47 (2.69)	14.60	12.52 (2.89)	7.73	12.64 (2.22)	0.81	12.62 (2.42)	15.12
Age	24.22 (5.46)	0.00	24.07 (5.21)	0.00	23.24[3] (4.68)	0.00	24.62[3] (5.72)	0.00
Race								
White	0.19	0.00	0.28[3]	0.00	0.23	0.00	0.17[3]	0.00
Black	0.43	0.00	0.33[1]	0.00	0.56[1,3]	0.00	0.39[3]	0.00
Hispanic	0.35	0.00	0.36[1]	0.00	0.19[1,3]	0.00	0.42[3]	0.00
Other	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.03	0.00
Education								
Less than High School	0.40	0.00	0.31[2]	0.00	0.37	0.81	0.41[2]	0.00
High School	0.33	0.00	0.34	0.00		0.81	0.33	0.00
Some College	0.26	0.00	0.34[2]	0.00	0.26	0.81	0.25[2]	0.00
MPF	0.41	12.90	0.36	1.10	0.43	0.81	0.43	0.00
Total People in HH	4.57 (1.59)	12.42	4.28[1,2] (1.44)	0.56	4.64[1] (1.68)	0.81	4.72[2] (1.50)	6.98
Income to Poverty Ratio	1.49 (1.39)	11.93	1.99[1,3] (1.65)	0.56	1.48[1] (1.19)	0.81	1.40[3] (1.25)	6.59
Residential Mobility	0.71 (0.94)	12.11	0.69 (0.90)	0.56	0.60 (0.72)	0.81	0.59 (0.83)	6.59
Father								
Age	27.14 (6.86)	1.00	26.82 (6.05)	0.56	25.97[3] (6.07)	0.00	27.51[3] (6.97)	0.01
MPF	0.36	14.60	0.32	1.66	0.36	4.07	0.37	7.75
n	1610		181		123		516	

Note. Statistics are drawn from Year 1. Standard deviations are only reported for continuous variables. %M stands for percent missing. HH stands for Household. MPF stands for multipartered fertility. [1] Denotes differences between Married and Dissolved samples, [2] Denotes differences between Married and Continued samples, [3] Denotes differences between Dissolved and Continued Samples.

Table 2

Maximum Likelihood Discrete-time Event History Models Predicting the Competing Risks of Marriage vs. Dissolution

	Marriage vs. Continued Cohabitation		Dissolution				
Key Independent Variables	β	RRR	β	RRR	χ^2	Person Years	*n*
No Controls							
Engagement	0.13**	1.13**	0.13**	1.14**	17.22***	6139	813
	(0.04)		(0.05)				
Indirect Care	0.56***	1.76***	0.30**	1.35**	46.05***	6401	811
	(0.10)		(0.11)				
Adjusted for Controls							
Engagement	-0.04	0.96	-0.08	0.92	69.86***	4583	715
	(0.05)		(0.06)				
Indirect Care	0.27^{+}	1.31^{+}	-0.31*	0.73*	76.60***	4551	713
	(0.14)		(0.14)				

Note. Standard errors reported in parentheses. RRR stands for Relative Risk Ratios. Control variables included: relationship quality, mother age, father age, mother race (Black, Hispanic, White (excluded), other), mother education (less than high school, high school (excluded), some college or higher), mother's and father's previous children with multiple partners, household size, total number of children < 18 in household, income to poverty ratio, and residential mobility. + $p \leq 0.10$ * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.