Couple Beliefs about Father Involvement and the Union Transitions of Unmarried Parents

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Abstract

Fathers are increasingly expecting to be involved in hands-on caregiving, and the co-parental dynamic arising from the partners' beliefs about father involvement may impact the couple's relationship. Using the first two waves of the Fragile Families survey, this paper investigates the two partners' beliefs about the importance of fathers' caregiving. When partners do not believe that fathers' caregiving is important, they are more likely to end their union. Unmarried partners are less likely to marry if the mother does not believe that fathers' caregiving is very important. Together, these findings suggest that when parents value fathers' day-to-day, hands-on involvement, they have a stronger commitment to their relationship, potentially increasing the resilience of nonmarital unions.

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Increasing numbers of children are being born outside marriage, yet unmarried parents often have unstable relationships. To ensure a stable family environment for the children in these unions, as well as to support the involvement of fathers in their children's lives, current policy initiatives such as Building Strong Families encourage unmarried parents to form strong relationships and healthy marriages (Dion & Devaney, 2003). To best serve these children and their parents, these programs need to consider empirical evidence of the interpersonal processes which enable unmarried couples to form the types of strong relationships that can provide stable family environments and the continued presence of fathers in their children's lives.

This study investigates how the relationships of unmarried couples are affected by being co-parents to their children. Co-parenting in this study involves the two partners' expectations for father caregiving. Couples who share expectations for father caregiving may be less likely to end their relationship, and more likely to marry one another. The impact of these partner dynamics on union trajectories can inform programs and policy focused on helping unmarried parents and their children.

Expectations for Father Involvement

Over the past half-century in the United States there has been a cultural shift in expectations for fathers. The 'traditional' father was involved in his child's life primarily through his financial contributions to the family in his role as breadwinner. In addition, he had a

supplemental role in the "just wait until your father gets home" discipline he provided. This kind of fathering is typically once-removed, with the mother acting as an intermediary between the father and his children.

A more hands-on approach is appearing as the new, 'nontraditional' norm of involved fathering. Here, fathers have a direct relationship with their children, taking part in day-to-day caregiving tasks (Deutsch, 1999; Pleck & Pleck, 1997). That this new norm is taking root is supported by evidence suggesting that some fathers expect to be fully-involved co-parents (Dienhart, 2001). The emergence of the new norm is also evidenced in the significant increase over the last four decades in married fathers' time spent in caregiving activities, particularly in the day-to-day care of children (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). Expectations for involved fathering thus appear to be becoming a part of the parenting experience of married couples.

Unmarried Parents

Unmarried parents have also been exposed to these new cultural norms. However, as most research on the new fatherhood has been conducted with married fathers, less is known about the growing segment of fathers unmarried at their child's birth. Unmarried fathers may be less inclined to be involved, since they do not have the institution of marriage framing their role in childrearing. Additionally, cohabiting couples tend to have lower educational levels and lower rates of employment (Smock, 1999), which may be associated with less father involvement.

However, there is also reason to think that unmarried couples might be particularly responsive to the new norm of involved fathering. Cohabiting couples have been shown to hold less traditional beliefs about the gendered division of labor in their relationships (Lillard, Brien,

& Waite, 1995), and thus may be more open to the father participating in the traditionally female tasks of childcare. Indeed, men who have more egalitarian expectations are more likely to become highly involved with their children (Burlanda, 2004).

Unmarried parents demonstrate their willingness to break with tradition simply by choosing this nontraditional route to forming families. They are a growing group, with increasing numbers of children born to unmarried parents, many of whom are cohabiting (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000; Seltzer, 2001; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). These relationships may continue in their nontraditional course, as one-third of partners in cohabiting unions do not intend to marry one another or do not share marriage intentions (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Sanchez, Manning, & Smock, 1998). Cohabiters further demonstrate their nontraditional beliefs by being more open to the possibility of divorce than are married couples (Axinn & Thornton, 1992).

The marital status of parents influences the extent to which fathers are involved with their children. When parents are unmarried at the child's birth, some fathers disappear from the child's life, although other unmarried fathers do become involved with the child (Furstenberg, 1988). Father involvement may be higher when unmarried parents are cohabiting than when they live apart (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2005). However, regardless of the marital status of the parents, greater amounts of positive father involvement, particularly fathers' caregiving, appear to increase children's well-being (Aldous & Mulligan, 2002, Marsiglio et al., 2001; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). It is important to keep in mind that individuals are self-selected into nonmarital childbearing. This selectivity means that differences between married and unmarried parents may be due more to the characteristics of the individuals and to their relationship dynamics than to their marital status.

Shared Expectations and Co-Parenting

The relationship dynamic between the partners provides an essential context to their conceptualization of the father role, as the two partners co-create a shared understanding of the meaning of fatherhood in their new family (Dienhart, 1998; Dienhart & Daly, 1997; Marsiglio et al., 2001). Thus, expectations for father involvement are derived from the two individuals as well as the interactions between them. Further, a more well-functioning relationship can encourage fathers' involvement with their children. High relationship quality and a more cooperative co-parental relationship contribute to greater involvement by married fathers (Gottman, 1998; Belsky et al., 1991) and divorced fathers (Amato & Rezac, 1994), as well as unmarried fathers (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999).

The influence of the partners on one another can also be observed in the impact of the mother's expectations on the father's involvement. When mothers believe that father involvement is important, fathers exhibit greater levels of involvement (DeLuccie, 1995; Fagan, Newash, & Schloesser, 2000). Additionally, fathers with egalitarian partners are more involved (Arandell, 1996; Barnett & Baruch, 1987), although others do not find this effect (Burlanda, 2004). Conversely, when mothers do not want fathers involved, their gatekeeping can limit fathers' involvement in parenting (Allen & Hawkins, 1999, Fagan & Barnett, 2003).

Partners may or may not be successful at co-creating their shared understanding of parenting. It would be most advantageous if both partners share expectations for father involvement, and research on other aspects of the couple relationship suggests that when the partners share beliefs about the gendered division of labor, they have a more stable union (Fowers & Olson, 1996). However, some partners may not see eye-to-eye on how fathers should

be involved in their children's lives. When partners do not share these expectations, one partner's views may be more influential. It may well be that in this case, the mother's views will predominate, since she has both biological and cultural incentives to be more invested in childrearing than the father. Research discussed above on gatekeeping and on the effects of women's expectations underscores the pivotal parenting role played by women.

Expectations and Union Trajectories

It thus appears that the structure and quality of the parental relationship can influence expectations for fatherhood, as well as actual father involvement. What remains to be seen is whether these expectations for father involvement, in turn, play a part in the couple's relationship trajectory. If couples who place a greater importance on father involvement are more motivated to stay together and to marry, it would mean that the new nontraditional norms for involved fathering may help to strengthen the relationships of unmarried parents.

The more the partners value father involvement, the more incentive they may have to maintain the relationship. If the parental relationship ends and the mother retains custody of the children, fathers would have less opportunity to be involved. Indeed, following divorce, noncustodial fathers' contact with their children tends to decline over time or even disappears entirely (White, Brinkerhoff, & Booth, 1985; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Furstenberg & Harris, 1992).

Likewise, the more important an involved father is to an unmarried couple, the more incentive the partners would have to commit to a long-term relationship by marrying. Although marriage does not guarantee a stable relationship, marriages do tend to be longer-lasting than

nonmarital relationships (Bumpass & Lu, 1999). Many cohabiting couples go on to marry one another (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991), and couples with children may have an additional incentive to formalize the father's commitment through marriage.

This paper examines the extent to which married and unmarried partners share expectations for father caregiving. It is hypothesized that unmarried couples will hold more nontraditional beliefs than married couples. These shared expectations are then used to predict the couples' chances of staying together after the birth of their child. The hypothesis is that couples who value fathers' involvement in caregiving will be more likely to stay together. Finally, the shared expectations are used to predict whether unmarried couples marry following the birth of their child. Again, the hypothesis is that couples who value fathers' involvement in caregiving will be more likely to marry.

Methods

Sample

This paper uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a unique data source which follows a cohort of new parents who are married as well as unmarried. It allows for a closer look at couple processes within these unions by offering detailed information on both fathers and mothers. For this longitudinal survey, new parents (N = 4,898) in 20 U.S. cities were interviewed in the hospital at the time of their baby's birth, and re-interviewed about one year later. All percentages reported in this paper are weighted to be representative of births in U.S. cities with populations greater than 200,000, and the complete study design and sample is detailed by Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan (2001).

Only the 4,129 couples in ongoing relationships are included in this study (84% of the original sample). Of these couples, 665 are excluded because the male partner is not interviewed (16% of the couples), and 335 further cases are excluded because the female partner is not re-interviewed (8% of the couples). Of these 3,192 couples, there are 7 (<1%) missing information on the status of the relationship at the second interview, and 11 (<1%) missing responses to father involvement in caregiving. Excluding these cases leaves a final sample size of 3,174 couples.

Union Dissolution and the Trajectory of the Relationship

Union dissolution is based on the woman's report of the couple relationship at the second interview. Of the 969 couples in the Fragile Families sample who report being married at the first interview, 5% end their union through separation or divorce, while 95% remain married. Of the 1,427 cohabiting couples, 26% end their union by discontinuing their cohabitation or by marrying and subsequently separating or divorcing, while 74% continue to cohabit or transition to marriage. For the 778 couples dating at the first interview (who are in an ongoing relationship but not living together), 44% end their union, either by discontinuing dating or by marrying and subsequently separating or divorcing, while 56% continue dating or transition to cohabitation or marriage. The outcome for the first set of analyses is thus a dichotomous measure of union dissolution.

The relationship trajectory of unmarried couples can be considered in further detail, including the paths of marrying one another, continuing their relationship unmarried, or ending their union. Using the woman's reports of the relationship at the second interview, 18% of the couples cohabiting at the first interview are married at the second interview, and of dating

couples, 10% are married at the second interview. The outcome for the second set of analyses is a multinomial variable measuring marriage, remaining together without marrying, and union dissolution.

It is important to note that the cohabiting and dating couples in this sample all have a child together. These women may be more likely to still be in a relationship with their child's father *because* they view a father as important for children. A woman with a nonmarital birth who does not perceive the father's role as important may be less inclined to continue in a relationship with her new child's father, and likewise fathers may be more inclined to continue relationships if they feel that their contribution is important. Nonetheless, while the results will be interpreted with caution, if shared expectations for father involvement increase the stability of nonmarital unions, it would suggest that these same shared expectations that drew these couples to remain together through the birth of the child may also serve to hold them together through the first year of that child's life.

Expectations for Fathers' Caregiving

The new norms for fatherhood are particularly focused on fathers' caregiving. Although there are many facets of caregiving, basic tasks such as feeding and dressing the child can certainly be seen as important aspects of hands-on caregiving. Mothers and fathers participating in the Fragile Families survey were asked how important it is for fathers to "provide direct care, such as feeding, dressing, and child care," and could respond with 1) *very important*, 2) *somewhat important*, or 3) *not important*. Although this question is clear as to types of caregiving activities, the frequency with which these activities would be performed is indefinite. Traditional aspects of father involvement are captured by additional questions asking how

important it is for fathers to "provide regular financial support" and to "serve as an authority figure and discipline the child."

The fit between the parents can be observed in the extent to which each endorses the father's caregiving role. I consider both the mother's and the father's responses together by creating four couple-level categories: 1) Both partners report that fathers' caregiving is very important, 2) Only the woman reports that it is very important, 3) Only the man reports that it is very important, and 4) Neither partner reports that it is very important. This coding is similar to other research comparing partner responses categorically (i.e. Gager & Sanchez, 2003).

Partner and Relationship Characteristics

Many aspects of parents and their relationships may be connected with both the trajectory of their relationship and with their expectations for father caregiving. Partners may not always share characteristics, meaning that the relationship may be impacted by each partner's background as well as by the heterogeneity between the partners. To capture this aspect of the relationship, I conduct all analyses at the couple level by including characteristics of the partners that have been coded into couple-level variables.

The relationship is made up of two partners and their individual backgrounds, including age, ethnicity, education, and employment. Lifecourse stage can play an integral part in the way a couple experiences their relationship, with younger couples tending to have more unstable relationships (see Larson & Holman 1994, for a review of premarital factors impacting marital stability). In this study, couple age is a continuous variable which takes the mean of the woman's

and the man's ages for each couple. Their age heterogeneity, defined as being 5 or more years apart, is also accounted for.

The ethnic backgrounds of individuals can encompass cultural norms about relationships, for example the high value placed on marriage in Hispanic communities, or the egalitarian division of labor often found in Black couples (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). In some couples, both partners report the same racial or ethnic background, and in this study, these couples fall into groups where both report White, both Black, or both Hispanic. Other couples have each partner reporting a different racial or ethnic background, and these couples are grouped together. The couples where one partner's background is unknown are unable to be included in any of these categories, and are thus grouped into a separate category, along with the very small number of couples where both partners report Asian or both report Native American.

The education received by the partners may be related to the stability of their relationship, particularly when they have not completed high school (Larson & Holman, 1994), and higher-educated couples may be more likely to endorse father involvement. As with age and race/ethnicity, partners can have similar levels of education, and in this study are grouped into three categories: 1) Couples where both partners have less than a high school education, 2) couples where both partners have a high school diploma, and 3) couples where both partners have more than a high school education. Many couples, however, have different educational levels, and due to the size and diversity of this group, this study accounts both for the heterogeneity as well as for the level of education by considering two further groups of couples: 5) Couples where one partner has less than a high school degree while the other has a high school education or more (there is a very small number of couples where one partner has more

than a high school education while the other has less), and 6) where one partner has a high school diploma and the other partner has more than a high school education.

Couples where only the man is employed may be less likely to end their relationship than either couples where both partners are employed or couples where the man is unemployed, and conversely, employed men are more likely to marry than unemployed men (White & Rogers, 2000). In addition, women in male-breadwinner arrangements may place a greater emphasis on their caregiving role and be less inclined to share it with the father. In this study, these three types of employment arrangements (only the man employed, both employed, and man unemployed) are accounted for by using the man's report of whether he was employed the week prior to the survey, and the woman's report of whether she was employed in the six months prior to the survey. This time frame was used for the woman because she had just had a baby, making the time immediately prior to the birth an unreliable measure of her actual employment.

Characteristics of the relationship itself, such as its length, the number of children, its quality, and the traditionalism of the couple's beliefs clearly are an essential part in its trajectory as well as expectations for father involvement. Along with age, the length of the relationship is a lifecourse marker indicating the relative newness of the couple's interactions with one another, and may play a part in both their decisions to marry and to end their relationship (Larson & Holman, 1994). In this study, this concept is represented by a measure of the time the partners knew one another before the pregnancy, and because of the skewed distribution, the log is used in analyses. The length of the actual marriage or cohabitation is not able to be used, since an equivalent date is not available for dating couples.

The transition to first-time parenthood is a transformative event in a couple's relationship, where the partners take on the new roles of mother and father. Often, they shift

from relatively egalitarian relationships to a more traditional division of labor (Cowan & Cowan, 1992), which can lead to a difficult period of adjustment. For couples who already have children, the addition of a further child involves an expansion of parent roles, rather than the new assumption of them. In many families, partners bring children from a previous relationship, and the presence of these children creates the additional role of stepparent for the new partner. Each of these circumstances can impact the trajectory of the relationship. For example, unmarried couples may consider marriage when they have a child together, and a stepfamily arrangement can precipitate conflicts which may lead the union to end. In addition, parents who already have children will have these experiences to draw on as they form their expectations for fathers' caregiving. These three groups are created for this study by using the woman's reports of children with their current partner and with former partners. The man's reports are not used due to the large amount of missing data. All couples in the Fragile Families study have at least one child together.

A conflictual or violent relationship may discourage couples from marrying one another, and may provide the impetus for leaving the partner. It is also possible that a woman may downplay the father role because of the actual limitations of her partner, evidenced in his violent behavior. In this study, relational violence is measured using each partner's report of whether their partner often or sometimes hits or slaps them, compared with never. Couples are grouped by whether neither partner is reported to be violent, only the man, and only the woman, with the small number of couples where both partners report violence grouped together with woman-only couples. The substantial number of partners missing a response comprise an additional category.

Relational conflict is captured in this study through a series of questions where the partners report whether they never, sometimes, or often have disagreements about money,

spending time together, sex, the pregnancy, drinking or drug use, and being faithful, with the responses averaged across the six areas and between the two partners. A couple score is used because the two partners are reporting on their shared experience.

Finally, the traditionalism of the couple's beliefs is included because more traditional couples may be less likely to end their relationship, as well as less likely to endorse fathers' caregiving (Larson & Holman, 1994). Traditionalism is based on responses to the statement that "It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family." Higher scores indicate greater agreement, and the averaged score of the woman and man are used, because this is the simplest measure including both partners and because it functions nearly identically to the partners' responses used alone as well as to measures accounting for partner similarity.

Descriptive Results

Expectations for Father Involvement in Caregiving

When the partners are considered separately (mentioned here for discussion purposes only), fathers' caregiving is very important to the vast majority of both men and women. Over 80% of women feel that the fathers' caregiving is very important, while over 90% of men believe that caregiving is very important. There is little difference in the responses of women and men who are married, cohabiting, or dating. Additionally, expectations for fatherhood do not appear substantially different for couples who already have children compared with those who are first-time parents. The high level of importance placed on father involvement, far higher than actual

father involvement, suggests that these expectations may be expressing idealized or normative expectations.

The number of individuals who believe that fathers' caregiving is very important is indeed quite high. However, since couples include two individuals, the number of couples where both partners believe that caregiving is very important is considerably lower. In only three-quarters of couples do both partners believe that the father providing caregiving is very important, as can be seen in Table 1, which gives the percentages of couples who fall into the four groups. The level of similarity between the partners may actually be less than can be observed, since there is no way of assessing whether both partners share an understanding of what caregiving means in their relationship. For example, the woman may interpret involvement in caregiving as undertaking half the responsibility, while the man may imagine performing caregiving tasks once in a while.

[Table 1]

In about one-fifth of all couples, one partner believes that caregiving is very important while the other does not. Men are twice as often the only partner who believes that caregiving is very important. It appears from this that men may have a stronger internalization of the new norm, while women may be downplaying the father's role

Married and unmarried couples show significantly different patterns of expectations. Unmarried couples, as anticipated, tend to believe more strongly in the new nontraditional norm of involved fathering. Figure 1 gives the couple beliefs about father caregiving separately by relationship status, and shows that there are higher numbers of unmarried couples than married couples where both partners believe that fathers' caregiving is very important. Additionally, there are fewer unmarried couples than married couples where neither partner supports father

caregiving, as well as fewer unmarried couples where only the woman expects fathers to be caregivers. However, there are no differences between married and unmarried couples in the proportion where only the father feels that caregiving is important. Finally, there are no significant differences between cohabiting and visiting couples for any of the couple beliefs, suggesting that marital status may be more important than residential status to the valuing of father caregiving.

[Figure 1]

Mothers and fathers who do not view fathers' involvement in caregiving as important are a relatively small group who may be downplaying the father's role for a variety of reasons. Mothers may not wish fathers to be involved in this aspect of parenting because they do not wish to cede any part of the role of primary caregiver. This may be especially the case for women in traditional male-breadwinner arrangements. It is also possible that these women do not see men, and their partner in particular, as competent caregivers. This may arise from mother-centric ideals of appropriate caregiving, or it may be based on very real concerns about the actual negligence or violence of the father. To account for these potential concerns of the mothers, analysis models will include employment status and whether women report their partner as being violent.

Parents may also be basing their judgments on prior experience, as a majority already have children, and may have experienced limited involvement by the fathers. Mothers or fathers who espouse a very traditional view of the father role, where fathers are limited to financial providing and discipline may also view father caregiving as not very important. I will consider these aspects of their experience by accounting for whether they are first-time parents, and for their attitudes towards a traditional division of labor. Finally, either mothers or fathers who

forsee the end of their relationship may downplay fathers' involvement, in anticipation of his decreased involvement or to diminish the consequences of the loss of the father in his child's life.

Partner and Relationship Characteristics by Union Status

Table 1 presents the means and percentages for each partner and relationship characteristic in the total sample. When these partner and relationship characteristics are examined across the three relationship statuses (not shown), there are a number of characteristics in which unmarried couples differ from married couples. Unmarried couples, either cohabiting or dating, are younger on average than married couples. Unmarried couples are less likely than married to have both partners report their race as White, while dating couples are more likely than either cohabiting or married couples to both report their race as Black. However, similar proportions of couples in each union status have the two partners each reporting a different race/ethnicity. Dating couples tend to have the least education, with married couples the most and cohabiting couples in between, and men in unmarried couples are more often unemployed than men in married families.

Cohabiting and dating partners have known one another half as long as married partners. About the same percentage of couples in all three union statuses are first-time parents, but more married couples have more than one child together, while more unmarried couples have children with other partners. In married couples, there is less reported relational violence than in unmarried couples, but there are more married couples where relational violence is unknown. Finally, couple conflict increases slightly across married, cohabiting, and dating couples, while traditionalism decreases across married, cohabiting, and dating couples.

Results

Father Caregiving & Union Dissolution

Union dissolution may be impacted by the extent to which couples believe that fathers' involvement in caregiving is important. To investigate this, I use logistic regressions predicting the likelihood of union dissolution at the second interview using partner and relationship characteristics as well as beliefs about father caregiving.

Model 1 in Table 2 shows the characteristics of the partners and their relationship which impact the union dissolution of married, cohabiting, and dating couples. The partners' educations are related to their chances of union dissolution, with couples where one or both partners has less than a high school education more likely to end their union than couples where both partners have more than a high school education. Additionally, couples where both partners report being Black and couples where each partner reports a different race/ethnicity are more likely to end their union than couples where both partners report being White.

[Table 2]

Several relationship characteristics are also related to union dissolution. As expected, cohabiting couples and dating couples are much more likely to end their unions than married couples. The shorter the amount of time partners have known one another, the more likely they are to end their union. Compared to couples where partners are having another child together, couples where the woman has had a child with another partner are more likely to end their union. Finally, the greater the level of conflict reported by the partners, the more likely they are to end their union.

Model 2 in Table 2 adds expectations for fathers' caregiving, and this analysis indicates that caregiving is indeed a significant predictor of union dissolution, when controlling for partner and relationship characteristics. A comparison of the two models indicates that the addition of fathers' caregiving contributes significantly to the explanation of union dissolution (chi-square = 9.85, df = 3, p = <.05). Expectations are the most consequential when neither partner believes that fathers' caregiving is important, and these couples are more than twice as likely to end their relationship as couples where both partners believe that caregiving is important. Couples where only one partner finds father caregiving very important are no less likely to end their union than couples where both partners share the belief, and additional analyses (not shown) indicate that couples where only the woman believes that father caregiving is important are no different from couples where only the man believes that father caregiving is important, and that each of these groups is different from couples where neither partner believes that father caregiving is important. Thus, when accounting for the status of relationship and the characteristics of the partners and their relationship, couples' expectations about father caregiving appear to be associated with the stability of their union.

These fatherhood expectations operate similarly for married, cohabiting, and dating couples, as indicated by models (not shown) which include an interaction between caregiving expectations and union status. Additionally, analyses (not shown) which include couple beliefs about the traditional aspects of father involvement, financial support and discipline, demonstrate that these expectations have no significant association with union dissolution, suggesting that expectations for fathers' caregiving may be a uniquely influential aspect of the mother-father relationship.

Father Caregiving & Union Trajectory

I next focus on the trajectories of nonmarital unions by conducting multinomial logistic regressions predicting marriage versus staying together unmarried or ending the union. This section focuses on the models predicting marriage versus staying together unmarried, as the models predicting marriage versus ending the union are similar to the analyses presented above.

Model 1 in Table 3 shows the partner and relationship characteristics which influence whether couples marry as opposed to staying together unmarried. The older the couple, the more likely they are to marry; however, couples in age-discrepant unions are less likely to marry. When either or both partners has less than a high school education, they are less likely to marry than couples where partners both have more than a high school education.

[Table 3]

Several relationship factors appear to have a different influence on marriage than they do on union dissolution. Couples where the man is employed but the woman is not are more likely to get married than couples where both partners are employed. Dating couples are less likely to marry than cohabiting couples. The longer a couple has known one another, the less likely they are to marry (but recall that knowing one another longer reduces the chance of union dissolution). Couples where the woman is reported to be violent by her partner are less likely to marry than couples where no violence is reported, but couples where the man is reported to be violent are no less likely to marry. Finally, couples with stronger endorsements of a traditional division of labor are more likely to marry.

Expectations for fathers' caregiving are related to whether the partners marry as opposed to staying together unmarried, as shown in Model 2 of Table 3. Here, gender is revealed to be a

more influential factor for marriage than it is for union dissolution. Couples where only the man believes that caregiving is very important are less likely to marry than couples where both partners believe that caregiving is very important. By contrast, couples where only the woman believes that caregiving is very important are just as likely to marry as couples where both partners believe that caregiving is very important. From this, it appears that a belief in the importance of fathers' caregiving encourages marriage, and that the woman's preferences exert a stronger influence on marriage decisions than the man's.

As with stability, expectations for father caregiving operate similarly for both dating and cohabiting couples, as indicated by interactions between caregiving and union status (not shown). Additional analyses (not shown) which include couple beliefs about the importance of fathers' traditional involvement, financial support and discipline, show that these expectations do not influence the transition to marriage. Again, beliefs about fathers' caregiving have a unique association with the trajectory of the relationship.

Discussion

The new ideal of father involvement in hands-on caregiving is being embraced by many couples. This study finds that, in the overwhelming majority of married and unmarried urban parents, the partners report that it is very important for fathers to be involved in caregiving. Further, expecting men to be involved in caregiving may strengthen relationships. Couples where both partners expect fathers to participate in caregiving, as well as couples where one of the partners expects fathers to be involved in caregiving, are less likely to end their relationship than couples where neither partner believes that fathers' caregiving is very important. This new norm of caregiving fathers appears to be uniquely influential, since expectations for a more traditional

role of financial provider and authority figure make no difference to couples' stability. Couples thus may benefit from these nontraditional norms which value fathers' caregiving.

Just as unmarried couples tend to have more nontraditional beliefs about the gendered division of family labor than married couples (Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995), this study finds that they also have more nontraditional beliefs about father involvement. Unmarried parents are more likely than married parents to have both partners endorsing the nontraditional belief that fathers should be involved in hands-on caregiving. Given that these nontraditional beliefs can lead to more stable unions, the beliefs of unmarried couples may provide a protective effect for their relationship.

Not all couples, however, share a belief in the importance of fathers' caregiving. In about one-fifth of all couples, one partner feels that father caregiving is very important, while the other does not. In these couples, twice as often the father is the one who believes that caregiving is more important. This pattern suggests that new norms for father involvement may have taken a stronger hold in fathers' expectations than in mothers,' and that women may be less enthusiastic about fathers' involvement in caregiving. This is a noteworthy configuration, since women's beliefs about father's caregiving appear to be an influential factor in couples' relationship trajectories, particularly their transition to marriage. When the woman does not believe that fathers' caregiving is important, even when the man does, the couple is less likely to marry than when the woman believes that fathers' caregiving is very important. From this it appears that if the woman does not find the father important, she has less incentive to marry him. Marriage thus appears to be encouraged by the new, nontraditional expectations for father involvement.

A key factor is whether women or both partners together do not consider father involvement important, and this group may have diverse motivations for placing a reduced

importance on fathers' caregiving. Women may not wish to relinquish parenting responsibility, or may be concerned that a violent partner may not be a good parent. Both men and women may draw upon their previous parenting experience, or may have traditional views of parenting. However, even when employment status, partner violence, parenting experience, and traditionalism are considered, beliefs about father involvement remain an important factor in relationship trajectories. One further reason for downplaying the father role could be the anticipation of the end of the relationship, and this anticipatory effect could be a factor in the connection between beliefs about father importance and union dissolution.

Selection effects could also be impacting this process. This sample may be biased in favor of more involved fathers, since these fathers may have been more inclined to participate in the study than fathers who are less invested in their children and partner. Also, mothers may be less likely to state that fathers are important if they do not feel that their current partner possesses the qualities which would make him a good father, and fathers may be less likely to state that fathers are important if they do not have a firm commitment to the child and to their partner. However, since the question asks about father involvement in general, and not specifically about the current partner, it is also very likely that parents' responses represent an idealized version of father involvement. Some indication of this is given in the nearly-universal response, across mothers and fathers in all three union statuses, that it is 'very important' for fathers to love their children, to teach them about life, and to protect them, suggesting that father involvement is a deeply-felt value.

Implications of New Expectations for Father Involvement

The increased stability of couples who expect fathers to be involved in caregiving has implications for the lives of unmarried parents and their children, as well as policy focused on these families. Programs such as Building Strong Families, which aim to strengthen the relationships of unmarried parents, can take into consideration this empirical evidence of the effects of partner dynamics on the couple relationship. This study provides evidence that expectations for fatherhood impact not only the stability of the union, but also chances of marriage. Although beliefs and expectations may not be easy to change, education can provide a framework for couples to discuss their expectations for the father's role in children's lives. Educational programs need to emphasize to both mothers and fathers that father involvement means hands-on participation in children's day-to-day lives. Reinforcing the expectation that fathers' caregiving is important could help fragile new families to maintain strong and lasting partnerships and secure the presence of fathers in their children's lives.

For those couples who believe that fathers' caregiving is very important but who nevertheless end their relationship, the expectation that fathers should be involved may induce them to work harder to ensure the father's continued involvement in his child's life. Caregiving may be more consequential than financial support, which can be provided from a distance and which has child-support statutes which aim to ensure compliance. Separated parents who wish fathers to continue caregiving must make certain that fathers have regular contact with their children. Thus new expectations for involved fathers could be beneficial to children even after their parents separate or divorce.

This study focuses on expectations for father involvement and not the actual behaviors of fathers. It is apparent that the expectations themselves may have consequences for the stability of the couple's union as well as for their transition to marriage, but fathers' actual involvement in

caregiving would bring additional benefits to their children. The next step, therefore, is to examine whether expectations for fathers to be involved in caregiving can be actualized, and which couples are able to translate their beliefs into action.

Couples' relationship trajectories are responsive to their beliefs about the involvement of fathers in caring for children. Couples where neither partner believes that father caregiving is important are more likely to end their union, and couples where the woman does not believe that father caregiving is important are less likely to marry. Thus, it appears that couples who hold the new nontraditional ideal of a hands-on father have stronger relationships. This finding is especially important for the growing numbers of unmarried parents who wish to create strong partnerships to raise their children. For these couples, as well as for married couples, valuing the father's caregiving contribution may make a meaningful statement about the importance of a cooperative co-parental relationship. This relationship, in turn, could greatly benefit the couples' children.

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Table 1: Expectations for Father Involvement, Partner Characteristics, and Relationship Characteristics

FATHER INVOLVEMENT	Total Sample
Father Caregiving Very Important (%)	
Both	77
Woman Only	7
Man Only	14
Neither	3
PARTNER CHARACTERISTICS	
Age	
Couple average (Mean years)	26.73
(SD)	(6.22)
Difference of 5+ years (%)	30
Couple Ethnicity (%)	
Both White	32
Both Black	21
Both Hispanic	27
Different Ethnicities	16
Other	4
Couple Education (%)	
Both less than HS	15
Both High School	14
Both more than HS	32
One less, one HS or more	21
One HS, one more	18
Employment (%)	
Man Only Employed	30
Both Employed	57
Man Unemployed	12
RELATIONSHIP CHARACTERISTICS	
Relationship Status (%)	
Married	63
Cohabiting	25
Dating	12
Relationship Length (Mean years)	5.12
(SD)	(4.63)
Children (%)	
First-Time Parents	36
More than One Child	40
Child With Other Partner	24
Relational Violence (%)	
Neither	82
Man Only	1
Woman Only	9
Unknown	8
Conflict (Mean)	1.41
(SD)	(.29)
Traditionalism (Mean)	2.30
(SD)	(.63)

Note: Data are from the Fragile Families survey and include 3,174 couples; percentages are weighted to be representative of births in U.S. cities larger than 200,000.

Table 2: Fatherhood Expectations for Caregiving as a Predictor of Union Dissolution

	Model 1: Controls			*Model 2: Expectations*		
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio	Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio
Age						
Couple average	-0.01	0.01	0.99	-0.02	0.01	0.99
Difference of 5+ years	0.07	0.11	1.07	0.06	0.11	1.07
Ethnicity (vs. Both White)						
Both Black	0.55 ***	0.16	1.73	0.57 ***	0.16	1.78
Both Hispanic	-0.10	0.18	0.90	-0.07	0.18	0.93
Different	0.39 *	0.19	1.48	0.42 *	0.19	1.52
Other	0.23	0.31	1.26	0.26	0.31	1.30
Education (vs. Both more)						
Both less than HS	0.39 *	0.18	1.48	0.40 *	0.18	1.49
Both HS	0.26	0.18	1.30	0.28	0.18	1.33
One less, one HS or more	0.29 *	0.16	1.34	0.31 *	0.16	1.37
One HS, one more	0.19	0.17	1.21	0.21	0.17	1.23
Employment (vs. Both Employed)						
Man only Employed	0.19	0.11	1.21	0.20	0.11	1.22
Man Unemployed	0.04	0.12	1.04	0.04	0.12	1.04
Union Status (vs. Married)						
Cohabiting	1.71 ***	0.18	5.55	1.72 ***	0.18	5.58
Dating	2.04 ***	0.20	7.65	2.03 ***	0.20	7.60
Length of relationship	-0.09 *	0.05	0.91	-0.09 *	0.05	0.91
Children (vs. More Children)						
First-time Parents	0.15	0.13	1.16	0.16	0.13	1.17
With Other Partners	0.25 *	0.13	1.28	0.25 *	0.13	1.28
Partner Violence (vs. Neither)						
Man Only	0.34	0.32	1.41	0.32	0.32	1.38
Woman Only	0.18	0.13	1.20	0.18	0.13	1.20
Unknown	0.44 *	0.21	1.56	0.46 *	0.21	1.58
Conflict	1.17 ***	0.15	3.23	1.19 ***	0.15	3.28
Traditionalism	-0.05	0.08	0.95	-0.05	0.08	0.95
Couple Expectations for Importance of Father Caregiving (vs. Both)						
Woman Only				-0.34	0.21	0.72
Man Only				0.11	0.13	1.12
Neither				0.81 *	0.32	2.25
Intercept	-4.59 ***	0.45		-4.65 ***	0.46	
Chi-square	550.58			560.43		
Df	22			25		

Note: Data are from the Fragile Families survey and include 3,174 couples.
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

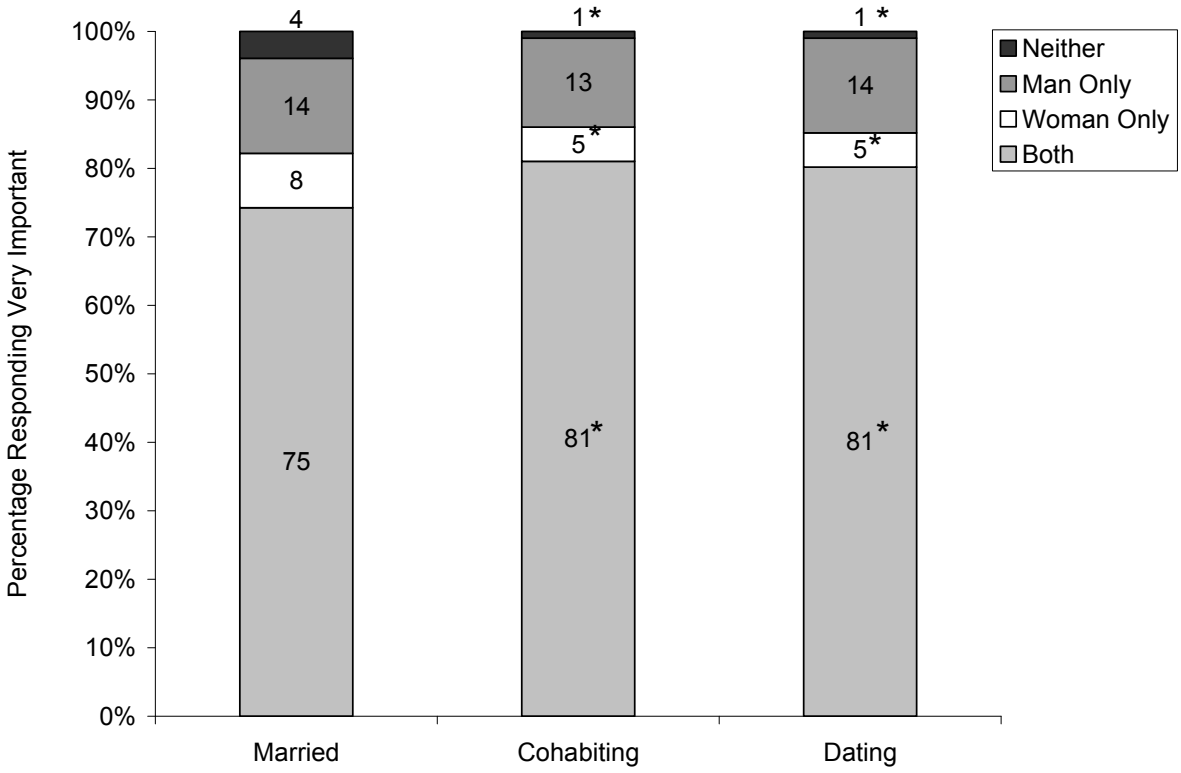
Table 3: Fatherhood Expectations for Caregiving as a Predictor of the Relationship Trajectory of Unmarried Couples

	Model 1: Controls						*Model 2: Expectations*					
	Married vs. Still Together			Married vs. Not Together			Married vs. Still Together			Married vs. Not Together		
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio	Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio	Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio	Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio
Age												
Couple average	0.03 *	0.01	1.03	0.00	0.01	1.00	0.03 *	0.01	1.03	0.00	0.01	1.00
Difference of 5+ years	-0.35 *	0.17	0.71	0.01	0.12	1.01	-0.34 *	0.17	0.71	0.01	0.12	1.01
Ethnicity (vs. Both White)												
Both Black	-0.36	0.23	0.70	-0.48 **	0.18	0.62	-0.40	0.23	0.67	-0.50 **	0.18	0.61
Both Hispanic	0.01	0.23	1.02	0.15	0.20	1.16	-0.03	0.23	0.97	0.13	0.20	1.13
Different	-0.07	0.26	0.93	-0.35	0.21	0.70	-0.11	0.26	0.90	-0.38	0.21	0.69
Other	0.42	0.43	1.53	-0.44	0.36	0.64	0.38	0.43	1.47	-0.47	0.36	0.62
Education (vs. Both more)												
Both less than HS	-0.80 **	0.26	0.45	-0.14	0.20	0.87	-0.83 **	0.26	0.43	-0.15	0.20	0.86
Both HS	-0.40	0.26	0.67	-0.10	0.20	0.90	-0.43	0.26	0.65	-0.12	0.20	0.89
One less, one HS or more	-0.52 *	0.22	0.60	-0.06	0.18	0.94	-0.55 *	0.22	0.58	-0.08	0.18	0.92
One HS, one more	-0.23	0.23	0.79	-0.03	0.19	0.97	-0.27	0.23	0.76	-0.05	0.19	0.95
Employment (vs. Both Employed)												
Man only Employed	0.37 *	0.16	1.45	-0.23	0.12	0.80	0.36 *	0.16	1.43	-0.23 *	0.12	0.80
Man Unemployed	-0.16	0.20	0.85	0.01	0.13	1.01	-0.17	0.20	0.85	0.01	0.13	1.01
Union Status (vs. Cohabiting)												
Dating	-0.55 ***	0.17	0.58	-0.25 *	0.10	0.78	-0.54 **	0.17	0.59	-0.24 *	0.10	0.79
Length of relationship	-0.20 **	0.07	0.82	0.13 **	0.05	1.14	-0.21 **	0.07	0.81	0.13 **	0.05	1.14
Children (vs. More Children)												
First-time Parents	-0.14	0.20	0.87	-0.10	0.14	0.90	-0.16	0.20	0.86	-0.10	0.14	0.90
With Other Partners	-0.32	0.20	0.72	-0.11	0.14	0.90	-0.33	0.20	0.72	-0.11	0.14	0.90
Partner Violence (vs. Neither)												
Man Only	0.02	0.56	1.02	-0.30	0.34	0.74	0.10	0.57	1.11	-0.28	0.34	0.75
Woman Only	-0.56 *	0.25	0.57	-0.10	0.14	0.90	-0.54 *	0.26	0.58	-0.10	0.14	0.91
Unknown	0.66 *	0.33	1.93	-0.52 *	0.26	0.60	0.64 *	0.33	1.91	-0.52 *	0.26	0.59
Conflict	-0.14	0.26	0.87	-1.11 ***	0.16	0.33	-0.14	0.26	0.87	-1.12 ***	0.16	0.33
Traditionalism	0.24 *	0.12	1.27	0.00	0.09	1.00	0.24 *	0.12	1.27	0.00	0.09	1.00
Couple Expectations for Importance of Father Caregiving (vs. Both)												
Woman Only							-0.11	0.30	0.89	0.28	0.23	1.33
Man Only							-0.45 *	0.23	0.64	-0.03	0.14	0.97
Neither							-0.62	0.77	0.54	-0.84 *	0.36	0.43
Intercept	-1.51 *	0.65		2.56 ***	0.46		-1.42 *	0.65		2.59 ***	0.47	

Chi-square	3956.72	3956.72	3942.93	3942.93
Df	44	44	50	50

Note: Data are from the Fragile Families survey and include 2,205 unmarried couples.
^ p<0.1 * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Figure 1: Couple Beliefs about the Importance of Father's Caregiving



Note: Data are from the Fragile Families survey and include 3,174 couples; percentages are weighted to be representative of unmarried births in U.S. cities larger than 200,000 and totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
* T-tests indicate significant difference from married.