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**FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND MOTHERS' PARENTING STRESS:  
THE ROLE OF RELATIONSHIP STATUS**

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## Father Involvement and Mothers' Parenting Stress: The Role of Relationship Status

### ABSTRACT

Although the salutatory effects of father involvement on child well-being are well established, whether similar benefits accrue to children's mothers is unknown. The prevailing cultural ideal of involved fathering coupled with the growing complexity of mother-father relationship contexts signal that an examination of how father involvement shapes mothers' parenting stress is overdue. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study (N = 2,480), we find father involvement is related to lower parenting stress for mothers who are married to, cohabiting with, or dating the child's father, but not for mothers who are no longer romantically involved with the father. For mothers living with a new partner, the current partner's, not the biological father's, involvement is related to less parenting stress. Results support the notion that the stress buffering effectiveness of social support, conceptualized here as father involvement, depends on the relationship context between support recipients and providers.

Keywords: Father Involvement, Parenting Stress, Relationship Status, Role Strain, Social Support

Involved fathering is now the cultural ideal prescribing fathers' proper role in contemporary U.S. society (Lamb 2000). Fathers are expected to spend time with their children and directly interact with them through activities such as playing together or talking to them (Lamb 2000). Research has shown that fathers today want to spend time with children (Townsend 2002) and actually do spend more time with their children than their counterparts did a few decades ago (Lamb 2000). These trends characterize not only resident fathers, but also nonresident fathers (Amato et al. 2009; Hammer 2001).

What this emphasis on father involvement means for the well-being of mothers is an important, yet underexamined question. Although a few studies have investigated the influence of fathers' participation in childrearing on mothers' general psychological distress (Baruch and Barnett 1986; Ross and Mirowsky 1998), anger (Ross and Van Willigen 1996), and self-esteem (Russell 1983), little research has focused on mothers' parenting stress—stress that is specific to the parenting role. In addition, the mother-father relationship context is increasingly varied and complex, ranging from married, cohabiting, or dating to separated/divorced or repartnered (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Henley and Pasley 2005). Thus, it is critical to examine whether and how the link between father involvement and mothers' parenting stress varies by mother-father relationship status.

Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), which captures the full range of mother-father relationship statuses, our study examines the association between father involvement and mothers' parenting stress with a specific focus on how this association varies by mother-father relationship status. Guided by the social determinants of stress framework (Pearlin 1989, 1999), we conceptualize father involvement as a form of social support, a key resource that may protect mothers from experiencing a higher level of parenting

stress. In line with Thoits' (2011) contention that the buffering effects of social support on well-being depend in part on whether the support comes from a primary or secondary group member, we consider how mother-father relationship status moderates the link between father involvement and mothers' parenting stress.

This paper advances our understanding of the determinants of mothers' parenting stress by shedding light on the role of a potentially significant yet largely overlooked aspect of social support: father involvement. Moreover, it contributes to the study of social support and stress by elaborating on the effectiveness of social support in enhancing well-being and the extent to which it depends on relationship context. Finally, the results have implications for research on family structure and individual well-being because they elucidate the relationship contexts in which mothers are most likely to benefit from father involvement.

## BACKGROUND

According to Pearlin's (1989) stress process framework, parenting stress is a major role strain—or a sense of difficulty in fulfilling expected demands of a social role—that is a common form of chronic stress. It involves the extent to which parents feel that the demands of parenting exceed the resources they have to cope with such demands (Abidin 1992; Cooper et al. 2009). Similar to other role strains, parenting stress has significant implications for mothers and children. Research has shown that a higher level of parenting stress is related to higher psychological distress (Simon 1992), poorer parenting (Belsky, Woodworth, and Crnic 1996; Deater-Deckard and Scarr 1996), and less developmental competence in children (Crnic, Gaze, and Hoffman 2005). Thus, it is important to decipher the factors that influence mothers' parenting stress.

### *Determinants of Parenting Stress*

The stress process model, which focuses on demands and resources, is useful in understanding factors that relate to the level of parenting stress (Pearlin 1989, 1999). For example, some child characteristics, such as younger ages, more difficult temperament, poorer health, or more siblings at home, reflect greater demands and thus relate to a higher level of parenting stress (McBride, Schoppe, and Rane 2002; Mulsow et al. 2002; Nomaguchi and Brown 2011). Certain parent characteristics, such as being a woman, having a lower income, and a being single parent, are related to more demands of parenting, which in turn are related to a higher level of parenting stress (Mulsow et al. 2002; Nomaguchi and Brown 2011; Scott and Alwin 1989). Even at the same level of demands, the level of parenting stress varies by levels of resources that individual parents can use to reduce or cope with the demands. A major form of such resources is social support. Social support refers to instrumental or emotional assistance that individuals can draw from their social networks (Pearlin 1999). Although sociological studies of stress tend to focus on the role of social support in reducing the impact of stress on mental health outcomes such as depression (Thoits 2011; Umberson and Montez 2001), social support can reduce the risk of being exposed to a particular chronic stress, including parenting stress (Pearlin 1999). Research has shown that a higher level of perceived social support is related to less parenting stress (Deater-Deckard and Scarr 1996; Mulsow et al. 2002; Secco and Moffatt 2003). In this paper, we focus on a particular source of social support for mothers' parenting: father involvement. Although research has shown that marital status or quality of the couple relationship are related to parenting stress (e.g., Cooper et al. 2009; Mulsow et al. 2002), the role of father involvement in shaping mothers' parenting stress is not yet fully understood. The next section discusses this link in detail.

#### *Father Involvement and Mothers' Parenting Stress*

Is father involvement a demand or a resource for mothers' parenting? A few decades ago, when the normative father role in parenting was limited to being an economic provider, father involvement in the direct care of children was considered a source of strain rather than a resource, which would increase mothers' parenting stress (Baruch and Barnett 1986). With today's cultural expectation of involved fathers (Lamb 2000), however, we expect that father involvement is a resource that may play an important role in reducing mothers' parenting stress in contemporary U.S. society.

There are two key instrumental aspects of father involvement. The first is *fathers' time spent with children*. The mainstream parenting culture in the United States today emphasizes the importance of parental time for the well-being of children (Hays 1996). A majority of mothers feel pressure to spend more time with children (Milkie et al. 2004) and a sense of time deficit with children is related to lower life satisfaction (Nomaguchi, Milkie, and Bianchi 2005) and lower sense of work-family balance (Milkie et al. 2010). If fathers pitch in to spend time with their children, it may ease mothers' sense of stress.

The second instrumental aspect of father involvement is *fathers' engagement with children* through shared activities such as playing, reading together, telling stories, and talking with the child. Parents' engagement with children through these activities is considered important for child well-being because it enhances children's human capital (Coleman 1988) and close parent-child relationship (Larson and Richards 1994). Milkie et al. (2010) found that engagement time with children, but not routine care time with children, is related to mothers' sense of balance. This suggests that quality, not quantity, of parental time matters for mothers' sense of whether their children are getting enough parental time. Fathers' engagement in such

culturally-valued activities with their children may ease the pressure on mothers to spend more time reading and playing with their children.

Father involvement also may play an important role in influencing mothers' parenting stress because fathers can provide mothers with emotional support. Prior research has shown that a greater sense of closeness with their spouse is related to less parenting stress for mothers (Mulsow et al. 2002). Mothers' perceptions of *fathers' cooperative coparenting* is a key indicator of the quality of one's partner's support for parenting. Cooperative coparenting refers to the extent to which parents support one another's parenting efforts (Margolin, Gordis, and John 2001) and can work together effectively in rearing their child (Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008). Research has shown that the quality of the coparental relationship is distinct from couples' general relationship quality (Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, and McHale 2004).

To date, only a few studies have examined the link between fathers' time with children, fathers' engagement, or fathers' cooperative coparenting on mothers' parenting stress. Using a sample of mothers who were married to or cohabiting with the father of the child from the three-year interview (Wave 3) of the FFCWS, Harmon and Perry (2011) found that fathers' cooperative coparenting, but not their engagement with children, was related to lower levels of parenting stress for mothers. Using a small sample of married parents, Margolin, Gordis, and John (2001) found that fathers' cooperative coparenting was related to less parenting stress for mothers. These studies focused on married or cohabiting couples and did not include mothers who were not living with their child's father. We argue that it is important to include nonresident fathers in the analysis and examine differences in the influence of father involvement on

mothers' parenting stress by mother-father relationship status. We discuss this point in the following section.

#### *Variation by Mother-Father Relationship Status*

Mother-father relationship contexts have become more diverse and complex. Resident fathers are either married to or cohabiting with the child's mother. Mothers' relationships with nonresident fathers can range from dating to separated/divorced, or mothers can be repartnered with another man (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004). Fathers today are expected to be involved with their children, regardless of the relationship context with the mother of their children. And, a majority of nonresident fathers remain involved in children's lives, albeit at much lower levels compared to resident fathers (Amato et al. 2009; Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008; Lamb 2000).

The salience of the mother-father relationship context in the linkage between father involvement and mothers' parenting stress is reinforced by recent conceptual work on social support and stress by Thoits (2011). She suggests that the effectiveness of social support in reducing social stress depends on the relationship context of the recipient and the provider of social support. She argues that there are two types of providers of social support. One is primary group members, which include significant others, and the other is secondary group members, which include people who have had similar experiences. Support from primary group members, she contends, should be more effective in reducing stress than support from secondary group members, in part because receiving support from primary group members is considered more normative than receiving support from secondary group members. By this logic, parenting support from primary group members (e.g., family, relatives, and close friends) is more likely



than parenting support from secondary group members (e.g., parents of their children's friends) to be related to a lower level of mothers' parenting stress.

We extend this idea to examine the role of nonresident fathers as providers of parenting support. Little research has explicitly documented mothers' expectations regarding involvement of nonresident fathers. Yet, several studies indicate that mothers in general may not view nonresident fathers as primary group members of their childrearing support networks for various reasons. Mothers often do not consider nonresident fathers to be competent parents because fathers' involvement in their children's lives is typically mediated by them (i.e., mothers) through low criticism and high encouragement (Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, and Sokowski 2008) and it is difficult to do so when the father is not in the household. Some mothers believe that nonresident fathers are not committed to the parenting role (Sano, Richards, and Zvonkovic 2008). There are mothers who even express strong wishes for no contact with fathers of their children because of fathers' illicit behaviors such as substance use, physical abuse, or other criminal activities that would be a negative influence on their children (Sano, Richards, and Zvonkovic 2008). In such cases, father involvement could be more stressful than helpful for mothers. All in all, we expect that although more father involvement is related to less parenting stress for mothers who live with the father, the link is not evident for mothers who do not live with the father.

Once they begin to live with a new partner, mothers may transfer their sense of who is the father figure in their family from the child's biological nonresident father to their current resident partner (Claessens 2007; Nelson 2006). Or, the causal direction could be the reverse with mothers repartnering because their child's father had not been involved (Claessens 2007). Thus, we expect that their current partner's involvement in their children's lives is related to mothers'

parenting stress, whereas their child's biological father's involvement with their child is not related to mothers' parenting stress.

Although much research has examined differences in the level of father involvement by a couple's relationship status (Guzzo 2009; Tach, Mincy, and Edin 2010), few studies have examined how the influence of fathers' involvement on mothers' parenting stress differs by the couple's relationship status. Using a sample of low-income African American mothers in New York City, Jackson (1999) reported that nonresident fathers' involvement was not related to mothers' parenting stress. However, it is unclear to what extent these findings could be generalized to mothers with higher levels of socioeconomic status (SES) and or membership in other racial ethnic groups. Kalil, Ziol-Guest, and Coley (2005) found that a decline in father involvement, measured as an overall scale of various forms of involvement (e.g., accessibility, engagement, and responsibility), was related to an increase in mothers' parenting stress among unmarried teenage mothers. The relationship status between the mother and father is not readily apparent, as "unmarried" parents can be cohabiting, dating, or not romantically involved. Additionally, because prior research has focused on either resident or nonresident fathers, it is unclear whether the link between father involvement and mothers' stress depends on the mother-father relationship status. The present study is one of the first studies that examine this question.

#### *Other Factors*

We control for factors that are related to both father involvement and mothers' parenting stress. Fathers' unemployment and incarceration history are related to lower levels of father involvement (Ryan et al. 2008), and perhaps related to mothers' parenting stress, as some mothers express their sense of distrust of their ex-husbands/boyfriends who have been incarcerated (Sano, Richards, and Zvonkovic 2008). Mothers' characteristics such as SES (e.g.,

education, employment status), race/ethnicity, and age are related to mothers' parenting stress (Nomaguchi and Brown 2011). Support from grandparents is related to levels of father involvement (Kalil et al. 2005) and mothers' parenting stress (Andresen and Telleen 1992). Child's difficult temperament and health issues are related to less father involvement (McBride et al. 2002) and more parenting stress of mothers (Mulsow 2002). The number of siblings is related to father involvement (Barnett and Baruch 1987) and mothers' parenting stress (Lavee et al. 1996). Fathers are more likely to be involved with boys than girls (Barnett and Baruch 1987; Lindsey et al. 1997), whereas mothers with boys are more likely than mothers with girls to report higher levels of parenting stress (McBride et al. 2002).

### *The Present Study*

The current investigation extends prior research by addressing whether prevailing cultural norm of involved fathering is related to lower levels of mothers' parenting stress. Importantly, our examination acknowledges the diverse contexts in which mothers and fathers parent, distinguishing among a range of both residential and nonresidential relationships. Our goal is to assess the linkages between father involvement (i.e., time with children, engagement with children, and cooperative coparenting) and mothers' parenting stress, emphasizing variation by mother-father relationship context. Father involvement can be a form of social support for mothers, but its buffering effect on parenting stress may be contingent on mother-father relationship status. Drawing on Thoits (2011), we expect that greater levels of father involvement are related to lower levels of mothers' parenting stress for mothers who live with the father, but not for mothers who do not live with the father (H1). For mothers who are living with a new partner, their current partner's involvement in parenting their children are more likely than the child's father's involvement to be related to lower levels of parenting stress (H2).

## DATA AND METHODS

### *Sample*

Data for this study came mainly from Waves 2, 3, and 4 (i.e., ages 1, 3, and 5) of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). Fielded between 1998 and 2000, the FFCWS is a stratified, multistage, probability sample of 4,898 children, of which 3,712 were born to unmarried parents (Reichman et al. 2001). These “fragile families” are at greater risk of stressful life events and negative outcomes, such as family instability and poverty. Mothers were selected from 75 hospitals in 20 cities with populations of at least 200,000. Approximately 5% of the sampled births were ineligible for the study, including those mothers who did not speak English or Spanish well enough to understand the survey, those who were putting the child up for adoption, and those who were too ill after giving birth to participate. The baseline interviews were conducted in the hospital soon after the child’s birth. Wave 2 (W2) interviews were conducted by telephone when the child was one year old, and approximately 90% of the mother’s were re-interviewed. Wave 3 (W3) interviews were conducted when the child was 3 years old, and Wave 4 (W4) when the child was 5 years old.

We selected mothers who were living with the focal child ( $n = 3,449$ ) and were not living in two cities where several core questions were not asked ( $n = 3,010$ ) in all four waves. Mothers who reported that the father was unknown, dead, or did not have contact with the child since birth or since the last interview were dropped ( $N = 2,480$ ). The three waves were pooled, which resulted in  $N = 7,440$  person-years of data for the *total sample*. For the analysis of mothers who are living with a new partner (either married or cohabiting), the *new coresident partner* sample was used, which included  $n = 56$  in W2,  $n = 135$  in W3, and  $n = 264$  in W4, resulting in 455 person-years of data. Of mothers who were repartnered, those who were not living with their

new partner were excluded from this subsample because questions regarding the current partner's parental involvement were asked only of those who were living with the new partner. A small percent of respondents had missing data on some of the variables with the highest being 12.3%. To deal with missing data, we performed the multiple imputation (MI) method described by Allison (2002) using SAS with five imputations.

### *Measures*

*Mothers' parenting stress* was measured as the average of four questions ( $\alpha = .61$ , 63, 66 for W2, W3, and W4, respectively), (a) "Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be"; (b) "I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent"; (c) "I find that taking care of my child(ren) is much more work than pleasure"; (d) "I often feel tired, worn out, exhausted from raising a family" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *disagree*, 4 = *strongly disagree*).

*Mother-father relationship status* was constructed using three questions: (a) "What is your relationship with (FATHER) now? (The response categories included 1 = *married*, 2 = *romantically involved*, 3 = *separated/divorced*, 4 = *just friends*, 5 = *not in any relationships*); (b) "Are you and (FATHER) currently living together?" (1 = *all or most of the time*, 2 = *some of the time*, 3 = *rarely*, 4 = *never*); and (c) "Are you currently involved in a romantic relationship with someone other than (FATHER)?" *Married* was measured as those who reported being married to the father (reference). *Cohabitation* captured those who were romantically involved and living with the father all or most of the time. "*Dating*" was defined as those who were romantically involved and living with the father some of the time, rarely or never. *Separated/divorced* was measured as those who reported being separated/divorced, just friends, or not in any relationship with the father, and reported not having a new partner. *Repartnered* included mothers who

reported being separated/divorced from the father and involved in a new romantic relationship (either coresident or dating).

Three types of father involvement were examined. *Fathers' time with children* (Carlson et al. 2008) was measured by the question, "In the past month, how often has (FATHER) spent one or more hours a day with (CHILD)?" The response categories ranged from 5 = *nearly every day*, 4 = *few times a week*, 3 = *few times a month*, 2 = *1 - 2 times a month*, to 1 = *not at all*. Fathers who did not see the child in the past month were assigned 1s. *Father engagement with children* (Carlson et al. 2008; Ryan et al. 2008) was measured as an average of four questions ( $\alpha = .80$  in W2,  $.85$  in W3, and  $.86$  in W4) that asked mothers how many days a week the father would (a) sing songs or nursery rhymes; (b) read stories; (c) tell stories; or (d) play inside with the child. Responses were categorized as 0 = *never*, 1 = *2 or fewer days*, 2 = *4 or fewer days*, and 3 = *more than 4 days per week*. Fathers who did not see the child in the past month were assigned 0s. *Father cooperative coparenting* (Carlson et al. 2008; Dush et al. 2011) was measured as the average of six questions ( $\alpha = .86$  in W2,  $.86$  in W3, and  $.89$  in W4), including: (a) "When (Father) is with (CHILD), he acts like the father you want for your child"; (b) "You can trust (FATHER) to take good care of (CHILD)"; (c) "He respects the schedules and rules you make for (CHILD)"; (d) "He supports you in the way you want to raise (CHILD)"; (e) "You and (FATHER) talk about problems that come up with raising (CHILD)"; (f) "You can count on (FATHER) for help when you need someone to look after (CHILD) for a few hours" (1 = *rarely true*, 2 = *sometimes true*, 3 = *always true*). Fathers who did not see the child in the past month were assigned 1s.

We used mothers' reports of father involvement, rather than fathers' own reports, for a few reasons. First, mothers tend to perceive less father involvement than fathers perceive

(Milkie, Bianchi, Mattingly, and Robinson 2002). Mothers' perception is more likely than fathers' perceptions to be related to mothers' parenting stress. Second, father reports have more missing data than mother reports. Third, prior research has reported high correlations between father and mother reports of involvement (Coley and Morris 2002; Smock and Manning 1997).

For mothers who were living with a new partner, *current partners' engagement with their children* and *cooperative coparenting* were asked using the same questions as asked for biological fathers. No information about time with children was asked, however.

Several control variables were included. *Father unemployment* was a time-varying, dichotomous variable (1 = *not working for pay*). *Father's incarceration history* was a time-varying, dichotomous variable where fathers who had ever been incarcerated were assigned 1s. *Mother's age* was a continuous variable reported in W1. *Mother's race/ethnicity* was a categorical variable measured in W1 including White (reference), Black, Hispanic, and other race. *Mother's education level* was a categorical variable measured in W1, including less than high school, high school (reference), some college, and college graduate. *Mother's health* was a time-varying, ordered variable (W2, W3, W4), ranging from 1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*. *Mother's employment hours per week* was also a time-varying variable (W2, W3, W4) where those who were not employed were assigned 0 hours. *Support of grandparents* was measured by the question, "How often does the child see your parents?" The response categories included 1 = *never*, 2 = *less often*, 3 = *a few times a year*, 4 = *a few times a month*, and 5 = *more than once a week*. Those whose child's grandparents were dead were assigned "1 = never". *Child's gender* was a dichotomous variable (1 = *girls*, 0 = *boys*). *Child temperament* was measured in W2 as the average of six questions, including "The child tends to be shy"; "The child often fusses and cries"; "The child gets upset easily"; "The child is very sociable" (reverse coded); "The child

reacts strongly when upset”; and “The child is very friendly with a stranger” (reverse coded). (Range from 1 = *least likely* to 5 = *most likely*). *The number of siblings* under age 18 in household was a time-varying variable (W2, W3, W4), ranging from 0 to 10. *Child health* was a time-varying, dichotomous variable (W2, W3, W4) ranging from 1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*.

For the subgroup analysis using the new coresident partner sample, two additional variables were included as controls. *Fathers’ new partner status* is a dichotomous variable where mothers who reported that the father was living with another woman were assigned 1s and others 0s. Current partner’s *incarceration history* was a time-varying, dichotomous variable where current partners who had ever been incarcerated were assigned 1s.

#### *Analytic plan*

We began by conducting descriptive analyses, examining mean differences for all study variables by mother-father relationship status. Then, in multivariate analyses of the total sample, we examined the associations between father involvement (i.e., time with children engagement, and cooperative coparenting) and mothers’ parenting stress and whether the link varies by relationship status, using both random-effects and fixed-effects models. Whereas random-effects models examine between-person variation, fixed-effects models focus on within-person variation that controls for unobserved time-invariant individual characteristics that might be related to both father involvement and mothers’ parenting stress (Allison 2009). Fixed-effects models, which more fully exploit the longitudinal data, are thus the preferable modeling technique. Following procedures suggested by Allison (2009), we conducted Hausman tests to assess whether the fixed-effects models were a better fit than the random-effects models. The results of the tests indicated that the fixed-effects models provided less biased estimates. Thus, we present findings from the fixed-effects models only (results from the random-effects models are available from



the authors). Note that in the fixed-effects models, coefficients for time-invariant control variables, such as child gender and temperament, were not estimated, as their effects are constant over time. Because the three indicators of father involvement were highly correlated ( $\rho = .63$  for time and engagement,  $\rho = .64$  for time and cooperative parenting, and  $\rho = .53$  for engagement and cooperative coparenting), we examined separate models for each indicator. For each indicator of father involvement, two models were estimated. The first model tested the main effects of father involvement on maternal parenting stress. The second model tested the interactive effects of father involvement and mother-father relationship status on maternal parenting stress. Finally, using a subsample of mothers who were repartnered and living with a new partner (the *new coresident partner* sample), we examined whether the engagement and cooperative coparenting of the current partner and biological father have independent effects on maternal parenting stress.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the variables in the analysis. The average score for mothers' reports of parenting stress was 2.18 (with a range from 1 to 4). The relationship status of the mother and father was 38.4% married, 23.5% cohabiting, 7.3% dating, 18.6% divorced/separated, and 12.2% repartnered. For father involvement, the average score for the frequency of fathers spending time with children was 4.11 (ranging from 1 to 5). The average score for fathers' engagement with their children through activities such as playing and reading was 1.68 (ranging from 0 to 3). The average score for cooperative coparenting was 2.60 (ranging from 1 to 3). Some of the time-invariant variables may be worthy of note as they provide the basic demographic and SES characteristics of the sample. The average age at birth was 25.6 years with a range from 15 to 43. Only about 14% of mothers finished college, whereas 27.5%

did not have a high school degree. A majority of mothers were racial/ethnic minorities with 24.8% White, 48.2% Black, 23.2% Hispanic, and 3.8% other race.

[Table 1 about here]

As shown in Table 2, the mean levels of mothers' parenting stress differed significantly by the mother-father relationship status. Compared with married mothers, cohabiting mothers reported less parenting stress (2.15 for married mothers vs. 2.13 for cohabiting mothers), whereas dating, separated/divorced, or repartnered mothers reported more parenting stress (2.18, 2.26, and 2.29, respectively), on average. Fathers' time with children, engagement, and cooperative coparenting also varied by mother-father relationship status. Compared with married mothers, cohabiting mothers tended to report more father time with children, but no difference in father engagement, and less cooperative coparenting. Dating, separated/divorced, or repartnered mothers reported less father time with children, father engagement, and father cooperative coparenting than did married mothers, on average. Because mothers differ significantly by their relationship status with the father on many background characteristics, as presented in Table 2, multivariate analysis is necessary to decipher variation in the association between father involvement and mothers' parenting stress by mother-father relationship status.

[Table 2 about here]

Results from the fixed-effects models examining the associations between the three indicators of father involvement—time, engagement, and cooperative coparenting—and mothers' parenting stress are presented in Table 3. For each indicator, Model 1 examined the main effect of father involvement on mothers' parenting stress and Model 2 added interaction terms between father involvement and mother-father relationship status. Although Model 1 showed that the main effect of fathers spending time with their children was not significantly

associated with mothers' parenting stress, Model 2 revealed that this effect depended on the mother-father relationship status. The coefficient for fathers' time with children was significant and the sign was negative ( $b = -.044, p < .01$ ) in Model 2, indicating that fathers' greater time with children is related to less parenting stress for mothers. Interaction terms, time with children x divorced/separated ( $b = .047, p < .05$ ) and time with children x repartnered ( $b = .057, p < .01$ ), were significant and the signs were positive. These results suggest that fathers' time with children is related to mothers who were married to, cohabiting with, or dating the father, but not for mothers who were no longer romantically involved with him. In fact, father involvement is associated with greater parenting stress among mothers who are either separate/divorced or repartnered. Similar patterns were found for father engagement. The coefficient for father engagement with children was significant and the sign was negative, whereas the interaction terms between father engagement and divorced/separated as well as father engagement and repartnered were significant and the signs were positive. These results indicate that a greater level of father engagement with children is related to less parenting stress for mothers who were married to, cohabiting with, or dating the father, but not for mothers who were no longer romantically involved with him, who tended to experience higher levels of parental stress when fathers were more engaged. Finally, the link between fathers' cooperative coparenting and mothers' parenting was also dependent on the mother-father relationship status. Once again, cooperative coparenting was associated with lower levels of mothers' parenting stress, but only for mothers who were married to, cohabiting with, or dating their child's father. Divorced/separated and repartnered mothers actually exhibit increased parenting stress. These patterns suggest that the key factor that differentiates the influence of father involvement on mothers' parenting stress is romantic relationship rather than residential status.

[Table 3 about here]

Further, using a subsample of mothers who were living with a new partner, we examined whether biological father or current partner involvement in childrearing was related to mothers' parenting stress. Descriptive statistics for this subsample are presented in Appendix Table. Results from the fixed-effects models that examined the associations between two indicators of father involvement—engagement with children and cooperative coparenting—and mothers' parenting stress for mothers who were living with a new partner are presented in Table 4. Recall that current partner's time spent with mother's child was not ascertained. The results indicate that current partner's but not the biological father's greater engagement with the child and cooperative coparenting were related to lower levels of mothers' parenting stress, which is in line with our expectations based on Thoits (2011) and consistent with the findings from Table 3 that reveal being in a romantic relationship is a key determinant of the effects of father involvement on mothers' parenting stress. In supplemental analyses (results not shown), mothers in the new coresident partner subsample did not significantly differ from mothers who were involved in a new but non-coresidential relationship (and therefore excluded from the subsample) in the association between biological father involvement and mothers' parenting stress.

[Table 4 about here]

## DISCUSSION

As cultural expectations for father involvement in childrearing have increased, the consequences of involved fathering for mothers' parenting stress are of great interest to researchers. At the same time, the mother-father relationship has become increasingly varied and complex, making it critical to examine whether the associations between father involvement and mothers' parenting stress differ by mother-father relationship status. The present analysis

conceptualized father involvement as social support and drew on Thoits' (2011) theorizing about the effectiveness of social support depending on the relationship status between the recipient and the provider of support.

The results suggest that, unlike a few decades ago when father involvement was considered a violation of gender norms (Baruch and Barnett 1986), father involvement is now a resource, rather than a strain, that is related to less parenting stress for mothers, albeit it depends on the mother-father relationship context. We found that the greater frequencies of fathers spending time with children and engaging with their children in culturally valued activities, such as reading and talking, were related to lower parenting stress for mothers who were married to, cohabiting with, or dating the father, but not for mothers who were no longer romantically involved with him. Mothers' reports of fathers' cooperative coparenting showed the same patterns. Furthermore, among mothers who were living with a new partner, the current partner's greater engagement with their children and more cooperative coparenting are related to less parenting stress. In contrast, the biological father's engagement and cooperative coparenting did not matter for mothers' parenting stress. This pattern of findings indicates the importance of romantic relationships in understanding how father involvement influences mothers' parenting stress.

Research on nonresident fathers has suggested that fathers tend to switch their parental investment from the nonresident biological child to the resident biological or step child (Furstenberg 1995; Manning and Smock 2000), illustrating the salience of resident status in determining the priority in fathers' parental investments. Other research has shown that nonresidential fathers' involvement with their child declines once custodial mothers formed a new relationship and the mother's partner engaged with their child actively (Guzzo 2009). The

present study reveals similar dynamics from the custodial mother's side. When they form a new relationship, mothers appear to switch their expectations for who is the primary father figure for their child from the biological father to the residential social father, and thus the extent to which the residential social father is engaged and cooperative seems to matter for mothers' parenting stress more than the extent to which the biological father is involved.

These conclusions are generally consistent with Thoits' (2011) argument that the extent to which social support buffers chronic stress depends on the sources of support and what kinds of ties individuals have with the providers of support. We suggest that who belongs to the individual's primary or secondary group depends on the types of stressors individuals are exposed to, because cultural norms about who should provide support may vary depending on the types of stressors. In the case of parenting, it appears that the men with whom mothers are romantically involved are expected to be a primary group member of support. In the U.S., romantic love is emphasized for marriage and union formation, and thus mothers' views of "who is the father" may depend heavily on their romantic ties with the man rather than their children's biological ties with him (Nelson 2006).

The findings should not be interpreted as discouraging father involvement when mothers and fathers are no longer romantically involved. In fact, it is important to note that the current analysis suggests that nonresident father involvement is not related to more stress for mothers. It is possible, however, that the negative effects of nonresidential father involvement on mothers' parenting stress could have been underestimated in the present analysis because of the issue of selectivity. Research has shown that mothers often act as "gatekeepers" to their children to limit nonresident father involvement (Fagan and Barnett 2003; Sobolewski and King 2005). Mothers

who anticipated that they would be stressed out by father involvement may have discouraged father involvement.

The present analysis has limitations that future research should address. First, in the analysis for mothers who are living with a new partner, information about the current partner was limited. For example, the positive association between the current partner's involvement with children and mothers' parenting stress might be explained by the current partner's higher SES. Without controlling for the current partner's SES, we are unable to eliminate this possibility. Second, the data included mothers with children aged 1 to 5 and we do not know whether the same patterns will be found for mothers with older children. For older children, for example, how father involvement influences mothers' parenting stress may depend on the quality of father-child relationships. Third, the present analysis documented associations, but did not permit us to draw conclusions about the causal direction of the relationship between father involvement and mothers' parenting stress. Finally, although the FFCWS had a critical advantage in that it included parents with various relationship statuses, it focused on a low-income population and thus future analysis using a representative sample of U.S. parents is warranted.

The cultural expectations for father involvement are pervasive, yet the mother-father relationship context is becoming more diverse and complex, meaning the consequences of father involvement for mothers' well-being may vary by mother-father relationship status. Our findings indicate that father involvement reduces mothers' parenting stress only when the mother and the father are romantically involved—i.e., when she is married to, cohabiting with, or dating the father. For repartnered mothers, the current partner's, but not the child's biological father's, involvement is related to lower parenting stress. This pattern of findings is consistent with the notion of the importance of relationship contexts between individuals and the providers of social

support in understanding the effectiveness of social support in reducing social stress. For mothers with young children, instrumental and emotional support from their romantic partner—whether the biological father or the current partner—appear to be effective in reducing parenting stress.



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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (M or %) for Variables (N = 7,440 Person-Years)

	<i>M</i>	<i>(Std)</i>	% Missing
<i>Time varying variables</i>			
Mothers' parenting stress (1 - 4)	2.18	(0.66)	0.5
Relationship status			
Married	38.4%		0.0
Cohabitation	23.5%		0.0
Dating	7.3%		0.0
Divorced/separated	18.6%		0.0
Repartnered	12.2%		0.0
Father involvement			
Time with children (1 - 5)	4.11	(1.35)	3.2
Engagement (0 - 3)	1.68	(1.03)	12.3
Cooperative coparenting (1 - 3)	2.60	(0.51)	3.3
Controls			
Father unemployed	23.6%		5.5
Father ever incarcerated	29.9%		7.4
Number of siblings (0 - 10)	2.37	(1.30)	0.1
Child's health (1 - 5)	4.53	(0.73)	0.0
Weekly hours of paid work (0 - 110)	21.67	(19.92)	0.3
Mothers' health (1 - 5)	3.75	(1.01)	0.1
Frequency of seeing grandparents (1 - 5)	4.19	(1.19)	0.1
<i>Time invariant variables</i>			
Mothers' age at birth (15 - 43)	25.56	(6.10)	0.0
Mothers' education level			
< high school	27.5%		0.0
High school	31.3%		0.0
Some college	27.3%		0.0
College graduates	13.9%		0.0
Race/ethnicity			
White	24.8%		0.5
Black	48.2%		0.5
Hispanic	23.2%		0.5
Other race	3.8%		0.5
Child's gender	48.0%		0.0
Child's difficult temperament (1 - 5)	2.78	(1.03)	0.4



Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Variables by Mother-Father Relationship Status (N = 7,440 Person-Years).

	Married		Cohabiting		Dating		Separated/divorced		Repartnered	
	M	Std	M	Std	M	Std	M	Std	M	Std
<i>Time-varying variables</i>										
Mothers' parenting stress (1 - 4)	2.15	(0.62)	2.13	(0.66)**	2.18	(0.68)*	2.26	(0.70)***	2.29	(0.69)***
Father involvement										
Time with children (1-5)	4.75	(0.66)	4.81	(0.58)***	4.16	(1.18)***	2.94	(1.46)***	2.47	(1.36)***
Engagement (0- 3)	2.11	(0.82)	2.13	(0.79)	2.13	(0.79)***	0.91	(0.92)***	0.68	(0.84)***
Cooperative coparenting (1 - 3)	2.81	(0.28)	2.79	(0.29)***	2.71	(0.37)***	2.25	(0.58)***	2.03	(0.63)***
<i>Controls</i>										
Father unemployed	0.11	(0.31)	0.22	(0.41)***	0.36	(0.48)***	0.36	(0.47)***	0.39	(0.48)***
Father ever incarcerated	0.11	(0.32)	0.31	(0.46)***	0.40	(0.48)***	0.47	(0.49)***	0.55	(0.48)***
Number of children (1- 11)	2.35	(1.23)	2.32	(1.28)	2.60	(1.46)***	2.37	(1.33)	2.42	(1.39)***
Child's health (1-5)	4.61	(0.65)	4.49	(0.76)***	4.47	(0.78)***	4.45	(0.80)***	4.48	(0.75)***
Weekly hours of paid work (0-110)	19.95	(19.62)	21.39	(20.08)***	20.75	(19.86)	23.70	(19.92)***	25.06	(19.88)***
Mothers' health (1-5)	3.91	(0.96)	3.72	(1.00)***	3.65	(1.06)***	3.62	(1.06)***	3.62	(1.06)***
Frequency of seeing grandparents (1-5)	3.97	(1.23)	4.19	(1.24)***	4.46	(1.08)***	4.37	(1.10)***	4.47	(1.02)***
Child's gender	47.4%		49.3%**		51.7%***		49.1%*		43.8%***	
Child's difficult temperament	2.63	(0.95)	2.84	(1.05)	2.85	(1.07)***	2.84	(1.07)***	3.00	(1.10)***
<i>Time invariant variables</i>										
Mothers' age	28.31	(5.99)	23.96	(5.44)	24.16	(5.79)***	24.39	(5.85)***	22.59	(4.69)***
Mothers' education										
Less than high school	16.0%		36.1%***		35.4%***		33.8%***		32.9%***	
High school	23.4%		36.9%***		36.3%***		35.8%***		35.8%***	
Some college	29.9%		24.6%***		25.0%***		25.7%***		28.3%*	
College Graduate	30.8%		2.5%**		3.3%***		4.7%***		3.0%***	
Race/ethnicity										
White	42.0%		16.8%***		8.0%***		12.9%***		14.2%***	
Black	27.9%		48.7%***		73.3%***		66.2%*		68.7%***	
Hispanic	24.4%		31.8%***		16.6%***		18.2%**		14.6%***	
Other race	5.8%		2.7%***		2.1%***		2.8%***		2.4%***	
N (person-years)	2,858		1,747		543		1,384		908	

Note: Differences in means (compared to married mothers) are significant at \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; and \*\*\* $p < .001$  levels.

Table 3. Fixed-Effects Models Predicting Mothers' Parenting Stress and Variations by Mother-Father Relationship Status (the Total Sample, N = 7,440 person-years).

	Time with Children				Engagement				Cooperative Coparenting			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Relationship status												
Married	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Cohabitation	.031	.029	-.099	.142	.032	.029	.009	.054	.030	.029	.176	.192
Dating	.034	.037	-.031	.119	.012	.038	-.056	.049	.034	.037	-.153	.228
Divorced/separated	.069	.034*	-.133	.092	.059	.033	-.024	.045	.063	.033	-.231	.143
Repartnered	.061	.037	-.159	.095	.051	.036	-.031	.046	.050	.036	-.461	.145**
Father involvement												
Time with children	-.010	.008	-.044	.017**								
Time with children x married			---	---								
Time with children x cohabitation			.028	.029								
Time with children x dating			.011	.026								
Time with children x divorced/separated			.047	.020*								
Time with children x repartnered			.057	.023*								
Engagement with children					-.021	.009*	-.050	.015***				
Engagement x married							---	---				
Engagement x cohabitation							.013	.022				
Engagement x dating							.047	.028				
Engagement x divorced/separated							.061	.023**				
Engagement x repartnered							.076	.030*				
Cooperative coparenting									-.050	.021*	-.152	.046***
Cooperative coparenting x married											---	---
Cooperative coparenting x											-.050	.068

cohabitation												
Cooperative coparenting x dating											.069	.082
Cooperative coparenting x divorced/separated											.108	.053*
Cooperative coparenting x repartnered											.216	.055***
Controls												
Father unemployed	.009	.020	.011	.020	.010	.020	.013	.020	.008	.020	.012	.020
Father ever incarcerated	-.049	.038	-.045	.038	-.051	.038	-.042	.038	-.053	.038	-.050	.038
Number of children	.018	.009*	.018	.009*	.018	.009*	.017	.009	.018	.009*	.018	.009
Child's health	-.023	.011*	-.023	.011*	-.023	.011*	-.023	.011*	-.022	.011*	-.022	.011*
Weekly hours of paid work	-.001	.000**	-.001	.000**	-.001	.000**	-.001	.000**	-.001	.000**	-.001	.000**
Mothers' health	-.041	.009***	-.040	.009***	-.040	.009***	-.040	.009***	-.040	.009***	-.039	.009***
Frequency of seeing grandparents	.003	.008	.003	.008	.003	.008	.003	.008	.003	.008	.002	.008

---

\*p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001.

Table 4. Fixed-Effects Models Predicting Parenting Stress for Mothers Who Live with a New Partner (the New Coresident Partner Sample,  $N = 455$  person-years)

	Engagement		Cooperative Coparenting	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
<b>Father involvement</b>				
Biological father engagement	.012	.071		
Current partner engagement	-.164	.058**		
Biological father cooperative parenting			-.094	.096
Current partner cooperative parenting			-.562	.188**
<b>Controls</b>				
Biological father unemployed	-.108	.136	-.070	.130
Biological father ever incarcerated	.021	.156	.054	.158
Biological father lives with a new partner	.021	.111	-.021	.112
Current partner ever incarcerated	.387	.141**	.269	.140
Number of children	-.021	.056	.017	.055
Child's health	-.020	.077	.002	.078
Weekly hours of paid work	.000	.002	-.001	.002
Mothers' health	-.130	.057*	-.126	.056*
Frequency of seeing grandparents	.060	.072	.070	.072

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

Appendix Table. Means for Variables in the Analysis for Mothers  
Who Live with a New Partner (N = 455 person-years)

	<i>M</i>	<i>(Std)</i>
Mothers' parenting stress (1 - 4)	2.27	(0.69)
Father involvement		
Biological father engagement (0 - 3)	0.29	(0.62)
Current partner engagement (0 - 3)	0.91	(1.15)
Biological father cooperative parenting (1 - 3)	2.02	(0.66)
Current partner cooperative parenting (1 - 3)	2.84	(0.27)
Controls		
Biological father unemployed	0.38	(0.50)
Biological father ever incarcerated	0.62	(0.51)
Biological father lives with a new partner	0.46	(0.51)
Current partner ever incarcerated	0.19	(0.39)
Number of siblings (0 - 10)	2.53	(1.39)
Child's health (1 - 5)	4.49	(0.74)
Weekly hours of paid work (0 - 110)	24.09	(20.24)
Mothers' health (1 - 5)	3.62	(1.09)
Frequency of seeing grandparents (1 - 5)	4.44	(1.00)