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## Better Parents, More Stable Partners: Union Transitions Among Cohabiting Parents

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BETTER PARENTS, MORE STABLE PARTNERS:  
UNION TRANSITIONS AMONG COHABITING PARENTS

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Keywords: Cohabitation; Coparenting; Father Involvement; Fragile Families; Union Transitions

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### Abstract

Fragile Families data (n = 1,702 couples) are employed to examine the association between mother and father reported parenting characteristics (father involvement and coparenting) and transitions out of cohabitation through marriage or separation in the five years after a child is born. Father involvement and coparenting may be signs of commitment and investment among couples without the legal bonds of marriage. Both father involvement and coparenting are associated with a decreased likelihood of separation, although neither is associated with greater odds of marriage. These results suggest that higher levels of father involvement and a positive coparenting relationship may keep couples together, which allows children to spend their early years with both biological parents in the household.

**Keywords:** Cohabitation; Coparenting; Father Involvement; Fragile Families; Union Transitions

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In 2008, 38 percent of cohabiting households included at least one biological child of either partner (Census, 2008). Half of all nonmarital births are to cohabiting parents (Child Trends, 2007; Ryan, Manlove, Franzetta, & Cottingham, 2006). Fifty nine percent of women who conceive a child within cohabitation remain in the cohabiting union after the birth (Manning, 2001). Among urban unmarried couples who give birth to a child within a cohabiting union, 28 percent marry within five years, another 28 percent separate, and 45 percent remain in a coresidential relationship (Carlson & Högnäs, 2009). Although prior research has documented unmarried parents' union formation and transition patterns during conception and shortly after the birth of a child, the family processes underlying these patterns have received less attention.

These family processes are likely to be integral to union stability and transitions. Family systems theory posits that the dynamics of various relationships within the family (mother-father, parent-child, and sibling-sibling) affect the other relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Additionally, the context of these relationships (e.g., parents working together to raise their child) is likely associated with other contexts (e.g., the parents' romantic relationship). In the current study, I examine whether father involvement (parent-child) and the coparental relationship (mother-father) are positively associated with the stability of the union. That is, higher quality parent-child and mother-father relationships will be associated with higher likelihoods of marriage and lower likelihoods of separation.

This research examines the roles of father involvement and coparenting in cohabiting parents' union transitions in the first five years of their child's lives. Perhaps the most consistent finding in research on children is that they fare best when their biological parents are married (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991; Brown, 2005; Osborne, 2007; Thomson, Hanson, &

McLanahan, 1994). Cohabiting couples with biological children who do not transition to marriage or who separate are characterized as having greater instability and complexity that reduce parental resources, such as financial resources, father involvement, maternal parenting, and parental health (McLanahan, 2009; Osborne, 2007). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the processes associated with cohabiting parents' transitions to marriage or separation so that policies enacted to encourage healthy relationships and father involvement can direct their focus.

In this paper, I first give an overview of the research and trends of the union transitions of cohabiting parents. I then propose an argument for why father involvement and coparenting may be a key dynamic to include in the study of union transitions among cohabiting parents. The hypotheses, data, measures, analytic strategy, and results are presented and conclusions are discussed.

#### *Father Involvement and Cohabiting Parents' Union Transitions*

Having a child is perhaps the most stressful experience in a family's life (Lemasters, 1957). Father involvement may buffer the stress of having a new child for both parents and is symbolic of commitment to the mother and family (Levy-Shiff, 1994). In the United States, marriage remains the normative location for conceiving and giving birth to a child. However, the rapid increase in cohabitation has resulted in a greater proportion of children being born to unmarried cohabiting parents (Raley, 2001). Although a minority of cohabiting couples report that the pregnancy was planned (Musick, 2002), a vast majority were not. Having a child outside of marriage, particularly when a child is not planned, may result in a higher level of stress for parents as it is an off-time event in the life course (Rindfuss, 1991). The symbolic commitment of father involvement, especially for unmarried couples who do not have the public and/or legal commitment married couples have, may be associated with a greater level of union stability or

with transitions to marriage. For a father, his involvement with his child may also be associated with a stronger sense of obligation to the family and may increase the level of satisfaction he derives from his role as father. Thus, it seems plausible that father involvement (or lack thereof) may be a significant factor to consider when examining the dynamics associated with cohabiting parents' transitions to marriage (or separation). It is also possible that fathers who plan to marry their partners increase their involvement with the child in anticipation of the marriage.

Surprisingly, these linkages concerning the role of father involvement in transitions out of cohabitation among couples with children have not been examined.

#### *Coparenting and Cohabitors' Union Transitions*

Although research on coparenting within the psychological literature is fairly extensive, it is relatively novel in other social science disciplines, and thus its role in the overall functioning of the family and its association with union outcomes has not been examined. Coparenting is conceptualized as the extent to which parents can work together to raise their child (Shoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). While coparenting and overall relationship quality are two distinct constructs (Carlson & Högnäs, 2009; Hayden et al., 1998; McHale, 1995; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000), they are somewhat interdependent. Over the transition to parenthood, overall *marital* quality is strongly associated with coparenting quality (Van Egeren, 2004). There is evidence of “spillover” in that marital conflict is associated with father involvement and the coparenting relationship (Katz & Gottman, 1996). This evidence, although scant, shows that there is an association between coparenting and the overall relationship quality between parents. This finding has been replicated among urban cohabiting couples with biological children in that relationship quality is associated with a positive coparenting relationship (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). Among cohabiting parents, a high

quality coparenting relationship may be associated with an increase in the odds of marriage and a decrease in the odds of separation. The current study will test this possible association, controlling for relationship quality and relationship expectations.

*A Note on Control Variables.* The positive association between relationship quality and relationship expectations in cohabitators union transitions has been well established in the literature (e.g., Brown, 2000); therefore, they are included in the current analysis. Prior research indicates that it is important to include characteristics of the mother, father, and child when studying father involvement and union transitions among cohabitators. Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, such as age, race, education, and labor force participation, have been shown to be important in union transitions of cohabitators (Manning, 1993; Manning & Smock, 1995). Multipartner fertility has become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon among unmarried couples and couples who have married following a prior marital or cohabiting union. Taking into consideration the number and composition of children mothers and fathers have is important, as fathers are likely to spend more time with focal children who are their only children. When fathers have older children or children by other mothers, they have to spread their time and resources between children. This oftentimes results in less involvement with the focal child (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006). Having children from multiple partners and/or in multiple households may be a relationship stressor and may inhibit the transition to marriage, therefore multipartner fertility indicators are necessary to include in the current analyses. Characteristics of the child, such as gender and health, may be associated with father involvement and union transitions. Sons are associated with higher levels of marital stability (Katzev, Warner, & Acock, 1994; Morgan, Lye, & Condran, 1988; Mott, 1994; Spanier & Glick, 1981) and an increased likelihood of transition to marriage among cohabiting couples (Lundberg

& Rose, 2003), although some of these associations may have become weaker over time (Lundberg, McLanahan, & Rose, 2007; Pollard & Morgan, 2002). Child health is negatively associated with father involvement and relationship commitment with the Fragile Families data (Reichman, Corman, & Noonan, 2004). Additionally, childbirth weight has been linked to union status and father involvement prior to birth so it is possible that it may also be associated with involvement and union transitions after birth (Padilla & Reichman, 2001).

### *The Current Study*

The current investigation examines the roles that father involvement and coparenting play in cohabiting parents' transitions to marriage or separation. Using data from four waves of the Fragile Families, I examine the union transitions of cohabitators beginning at the time of birth until the focal child is age five as a function of father involvement and coparenting over time.

I expect father involvement and coparenting to be positively associated with the transition to marriage and negatively associated with the transition to separation. This hypothesis is empirically evaluated using event history techniques to model the competing risks of transitioning to marriage or separation versus remaining in a cohabiting union. I hypothesize that the control variables will weaken the association between parenting characteristics and transitions out of cohabitation, as they are associated with parenting behaviors.

## METHOD

Data from all four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (Fragile Families) are used to investigate the current research questions using discrete-time event history analyses. Mothers in 20 cities with populations over 200,000 were first interviewed in 2000 within 48 hours of giving birth (N = 4,898). Fathers were interviewed in the hospital or shortly after the birth, if possible. Both parents were then re-interviewed one, three, and five years later.

For more details on the study, see Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, and McLanahan (2001). For the current investigation, mothers and fathers who were cohabiting at the baseline interview (i.e., at the child's birth;  $N = 1,783$ ) and have at least one interview per parent are included ( $N = 1,702$ ). Nonmarital births are oversampled by a factor of five and response rates are highest among married and cohabiting fathers; therefore, Fragile Families is most representative of cohabiting fathers, followed by married fathers, and is least representative of visiting fathers and fathers who are not romantically involved mothers (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Given this representativeness, and the fact that father involvement and coparenting, as well as some control variables such as relationship quality and expectations, are characteristics of the dyad (i.e., mother and father), fathers' responses are valuable and lead to a more accurate understanding of the dyadic processes in the parental relationship. Further, research has shown that mothers and fathers do not typically report the same levels of father involvement (Coley & Morris, 2002; Mickelson, 2008); therefore, it is favorable to use reports from both parents when measuring these concepts. Fathers' responses are included where available.

### *Measures*

#### *Dependent Variable*

Using a series of questions about the parents' current relationship status and living arrangements from mothers' reports (unless the mother's report is missing, then the father's report is used if available), Fragile Families constructs the parents' union status at the beginning of each wave. Only cohabiting parents at baseline are considered for the current analysis. If a transition occurred between waves (i.e., separation or marriage), the respondent is asked the date of that transition. Mothers' reports of transition dates are used. If the year of the transition is reported but a month is not, January is assigned. If the year is also missing, the father reported

date is used. If the father's date is missing as well, January of the year of interview is assigned (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2004). If a couple transitions from cohabitation to a visiting relationship ( $n = 101$ ), they are considered separated for the purposes of this analysis since they are no longer coresident. Fragile Families does not ask for the date a partner moved out of the household if they are still in a romantic relationship, therefore, the midpoint between the interview dates within which the transition occurred is imputed for the end date. There are three events that can end the hazard time: (1) parents marry each other, (2) parents separate or become visiting, or (3) parents continuously cohabit through their last interview date. In other words, marriage and separation are modeled as competing risks.

### *Independent Variables*

*Father Involvement.* A time-varying measure of father involvement is included in the analyses. Mothers and fathers are asked to report the number of days per week the father sings songs or nursery rhymes, reads stories, tells stories, and plays with toys such as blocks or legos. Given that items need to be consistent across waves to understand how father involvement over time is associated with union transitions, and these four items satisfy this criterion, they are the items used in the analysis with original coding maintained. These items are averaged for each parent to get a mother reported father involvement score and a father reported father involvement score at each wave (range 0 – 7). Higher scores indicate higher average days per week. Missing values on any single dimension are replaced by the mean of the other dimensions. If all dimensions are missing, multiple imputation is employed. Alphas for mothers are 0.79 at time 1, 0.86 at time 3, and 0.86 at time 5, and alphas for fathers are 0.75, 0.80, and 0.77, respectively. Since father involvement is not measured at time 0, time 1 father involvement is assigned for every month from the child's birth until the third interview date, at which point, time 3-father

involvement is recorded for every month until time 5. Since transitions occur between waves, involvement measured at the previous wave comes before the transition (correct temporal ordering), but since father involvement is not measured at time 0, as the opportunity to be involved with the child is limited, time 1 father involvement is used as a proxy. However, if a transition already occurred in the first year, the temporal order would not be correct, therefore, the father involvement results for those who made a transition in the first year should be interpreted with caution.

*Coparenting.* A time-varying indicator of mother reported coparenting is measured. Mothers are asked on a scale from *never true* (0) to *always true* (3) the following six items: “How often: does [father] act like a father you want for your child; can you trust [father] to take good care of your child; does [father] respect your schedule and rules; does [father] support you in raising your child; can you talk about problems with parenting with [father]; can you count on [father] for help?” These items are summed (range 3 – 18) to get a time-varying *mother reported coparenting score*. Higher scores indicate higher levels of coparenting. The same strategy as described above for father involvement is used to handle missing data and to construct the couple-month file. Alphas are 0.85 at time 1, 0.81 at time 3, and 0.79 at time 5.

*Time.* The focus of the current study is union transitions *after* the birth of a child, which results in a left-truncated sample. In other words, couples are at risk of transitioning out of cohabitation from the day they begin cohabiting, but risk in this study is only measured from the time of the child’s birth. I include a measure of the time the couple spent living together before the birth of the child. At time 1, couples are asked when they began living together. The same strategy to handle missing transition dates is used to handle missing start dates. A set of time-varying year dummy variables (year 1 through year 5) indicate how many years since the birth.

*Relationship Quality.* Supportiveness is the only relationship quality construct that is consistently measured throughout all four waves of the Fragile Families study and thus can be included as a time-varying measure. Mothers and fathers are both asked at baseline, “How often is the baby’s mother/father: fair and willing to compromise, express affection or love for you, insult or criticize you or your ideas (reverse coded), encourages you to do things that are important to you.” Recoded responses are never (0), sometimes (1), or often (2). For ease of comparison, I am only using the original four items in the follow-up waves, although additional items were added. These items are summed to create a supportiveness scale that ranges from 0 to 8; higher scores indicate a higher level of supportiveness from their partner. This time-varying scale is measured separately for mothers and fathers. In the couple-period file, reported supportiveness at time 0 is carried through until time 1, at which point supportiveness at time 1 is noted and assigned until time 3 and so on until the couple is censored. This is the same scale used in other Fragile Families studies (e.g., Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Mincy, Garfinkel, & Neponmyaschy, 2005; Osborne, 2005). Alphas for waves 0, 1, 3, and 5 are 0.57, 0.61, 0.65, and 0.63, respectively, for mothers and 0.55, 0.51, 0.54, and 0.60, respectively, for fathers.

*Relationship Expectations.* Respondents who are cohabiting at the baseline interview are asked, “Do you and [baby’s mother/father] have plans to marry in the future?” to which they respond either *yes* (1) or *no* (0). Four dummy variables are created to indicate *both partners report plans to marry* (reference), *mother only reports plans to marry*, *father only reports plans to marry*, or *neither partner reports plans to marry* at the child’s birth.

*Father and Mother Characteristics.* Self-reported education is taken from both parents at baseline. Each parent reports their highest level of education. Dummy variables are created indicating whether the father (mother) has *less than a high school degree*, *a high school diploma*

*or equivalent (reference), some college or technical training, or a college degree or above.* As mother's age and father's age are highly correlated (0.70), only father's age measured in years is included in the analyses.

*Dyad Characteristics.* The combination of parents' racial and ethnic background is determined by examining the Fragile Families-constructed variable for each parent. Dummies are created to indicate the parents are both *non-Hispanic White* (reference), *non-Hispanic Black*, *Hispanic*, of *another racial/ethnic background*, or the parents are from *different racial/ethnic backgrounds*.

Mothers and fathers are asked at each wave how many children they have together and how many children they have by other partners. Using these questions, it is determined whether the dyad has *only the focal child* (reference), *only biological children together*, *the mother has children who are not biologically related to the father*, *the father has children who are not biologically related to the mother*, or *both parents have other biological children*. Note that other children, if present, are not necessarily living in the same household as the focal child and/or the father.

A set of time-varying labor force participation dummies is based on the number of hours mothers and fathers report working per week at their current or most recent job to indicate *both mother and father work full-time* (reference), *father only works full-time*, *mother only works full-time*, *neither mother nor father works full-time*.

At each wave, the *time difference between the mother and father interviews* has been recoded in days, with negative numbers indicating that the father was interviewed first, positive numbers indicating that the mother was interviewed first, and 0 indicating they were interviewed on the same day (e.g., -12 = father was interviewed 12 days before the mother, 26 = mother was

interviewed 26 days before the father). Efforts were made to interview parents as close to each other as possible (Reichman et al., 2001). A long time period between interviews may indicate issues that may signify problems between parents.

*Child Characteristics.* Gender of child is taken from the mother's baseline survey: *boy* (1), *girl* (0). Fragile Families constructs a variable indicating whether the focal child was considered low birth weight. Original coding of this variable is maintained: (1) *low-birth weight*, (0) *normal weight*. At each wave, fathers are asked about their child's overall health, ranging from (1) very poor to (5) excellent. Due to the skewed distribution, a time-varying dummy is created indicating father reports child's health as *excellent* (1) or *less than excellent* (0).

#### *Analytic Strategy*

The data are reconstructed to create a couple-month file. Means and standard deviations are shown for the full sample at baseline using listwise deletion. The event history data are analyzed using a discrete-time competing risks hazard model in which marriage and separation are treated as competing events. Multiple imputation is used to handle missing data in the multivariate models. Parenting indicators (father involvement and coparenting) are included, controlling for time, in the initial model. Then the control variables are included to test whether the relationship characteristics and characteristics of the mother, father, child, and dyad reduce the effects of father involvement and coparenting.

## RESULTS

### *Descriptive Statistics of Dependent and Focal Independent Variables*

Means and standard errors for all variables are shown in Table 1 using listwise deletion; therefore, not all percentages may add up to 100 percent. Eighteen percent of cohabitators at birth remain cohabiting over the observation period and do not make a transition, 27 percent marry,

and 51 percent separate. Mothers, on average, report less involvement by fathers than fathers report (3.63 days per week versus 4.07, respectively). Mothers report high levels of coparenting, with an average of 16.54 out of 18.

Couples are in cohabiting relationships for an average of 31 months (2.58 years) before the baby is born. Thirty five percent of couples are censored in the first year after birth (i.e., they transition out of cohabitation in the first year), 24 percent in the second year, 17 percent in the third year, 13 percent in the fourth year, and 11 remain under observation through the fifth year.

Mothers report receiving slightly more support from fathers (6.56) than do fathers report receiving from mothers (6.51). At the time of birth, 82 percent of mothers and fathers both report having plans to marry their partner. For four percent of couples, only the mother reports having marriage plans and for nine percent of couples, only the father reports plans to marry. Five percent of couples do not report marriage plans at the baseline interview.

Causal ordering and collinearity need to be addressed. In the current study, I hypothesize that higher levels of father involvement and coparenting may be signs of commitment among cohabiting couples and may result in transitions out of cohabitation, controlling for relationship quality and marital expectations at birth. There is the possibility that high levels of relationship quality and marital expectations may actually result in higher levels of father involvement and a better coparenting relationship. While I cannot test for the direction of this relationship, I find that at any given wave, the correlations between the focal variables and relationship quality and expectations are not as high as one might think (results not shown; available upon request). The correlation between mother and father reported father involvement hovers around 0.30. The correlation coefficient for mother reported father involvement and coparenting (which is also reported by mothers) is highest at time 5 (0.41). Father involvement and supportiveness

(regardless of reporter) range from 0.07 to 0.28. Coparenting and mother reported support are most highly correlated among all the variables ranging from 0.48 to 0.55. The correlations of any focal variable with marriage expectations are no higher than 0.10. These correlations show support for the argument that father involvement and coparenting as well as coparenting and relationship quality are distinct constructs.

### *Multivariate Analyses*

The odds ratios from the discrete-time event history analyses of the relative risk of transitioning to marriage or separation versus remaining cohabiting over the observation period are shown in Table 2. All models include the time and duration indicators. Model 1 includes parenting characteristics only and shows that father reported father involvement is associated with a decreased likelihood of separation (5% lower odds), but it is not associated with the odds of marriage regardless of reporter. Coparenting is also negatively associated with the odds of separation (0.83). Hypothesis 1 posits that father involvement and coparenting are positively associated with marriage and negatively associated with separation, therefore, there is only partial support for this hypothesis here. Although father involvement and a positive coparenting relationship are not associated with the likelihood of transitioning to marriage, they are remaining together, and they are more likely to separate when father involvement and coparenting (investment) is low.

### *Associations among Time, Duration, and Union Transitions*

Model 2 is the full model that includes all the covariates. The time and duration indicators show few changes between models. The amount of time a couple lived together before the birth of the child is not significantly associated with transitions out of cohabitation. In the first year after the birth of a child, couples have 52 percent greater odds of marrying

controlling for parenting characteristics, which is reduced to 29 percent after relationship characteristics and other controls are taken into account. Also in the first year, couples have 33 percent lower odds of separating than remaining in a cohabiting union as compared to the fifth year after birth controlling for father involvement and coparenting, which increases to 42 percent lower odds controlling for relationship features. The first year is the only year that cohabiting couples have greater odds of marriage. Prior research has shown that if couples do not marry before the birth of their child, they are less likely to marry after the birth (Manning, 2004; Manning & Smock, 1995), however, these findings show that perhaps if couples do not marry within a year of birth, they are less likely to marry at all (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). Cohabiting parents have lower odds of separation in the first, second, and fourth years of their child's lives than they do in the fifth year.

#### *Associations between Control Variables and Union Transitions*

The associations between parenting characteristics and union transitions persist net of controls. For fathers, reporting higher levels of supportiveness from one's partner is associated with a greater likelihood of marriage versus remaining cohabiting (1.09). Supportiveness reduces the odds of separation for mothers (0.94). In other words, when fathers feel more supported by mothers, they are more likely to get married, whereas when mothers feel more supported by fathers, the odds of separation are reduced. Compared to couples who both report plans to marry, couples for whom only the father reports marriage plans are 35 percent less likely to marry. Couples who do not have marriage plans at the child's birth are 52 percent less likely to marry, although it is only marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ). Couples for whom only the mother reports plans to marry at birth are less likely to separate than those who both report marriage plans. There are no other significant contrasts between marriage plans categories in the odds of

marriage or separation. This could reflect the lack of variability among the plans to marry categories. Most cohabiting couples report that they have plans to marry their partner at the child's birth, which could be a result of the optimism surrounding the event.

Education matters for cohabitators' union transitions in that fathers and mothers with more education are more likely to marry, and mothers with more education are less likely to separate than their counterparts with less education. The older fathers are at the child's birth the less likely they are to separate versus remain cohabiting. Characteristics of the child are not associated with the odds of marriage or separation.

Race is also associated with union transitions among cohabitators in that Black parents are least likely to marry and most likely to separate, whereas Hispanic parents are least likely to separate than other parents. Multipartner fertility is not associated with the odds of marriage. When fathers have children by other mothers or when both parents have children by other partners, couples have greater odds of separation than when the focal child an only child, parents have more than one biological child together, or when mothers only have children by other fathers. When mothers only work full-time, couples are significantly less likely to marry (.64) than when fathers only work full-time. No other labor force participation contrasts are significant.

## DISCUSSION

A rapidly growing proportion of children in the United States are born to cohabiting parents. By the time a child is born, cohabiting parents effectively have made a decision to *not* marry before the birth and some research has suggested that parents are not likely to transition to marriage after the child is born (Manning 2004; 2001). Furthermore, cohabiting unions tend to be fairly unstable and the birth of a child typically does not increase the stability of unions

(Manning, 2004). No research on the factors associated with transitions out of cohabitation has considered the roles of father involvement and coparenting even though a sizeable proportion of cohabitators have children.

The current study has posited, drawing on family systems theory, that when fathers are more involved and parents have a supportive coparental relationship, the odds of marriage will be higher and the odds of separation will be lower. Using data from cohabiting parents in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, the analyses show that father involvement and coparenting are associated with lower odds of separation but that neither is associated with the odds of marriage. These effects persist even after controlling for relationship quality and marital expectations and a number of father, mother, child, and dyad characteristics. Fathers who are involved with their children are likely to remain in long-term unions with mothers but not necessarily transition to marriage. These results suggest that policies that encourage father involvement and parents working together to raise their child may effectively stabilize cohabiting unions so they stay together. Furthermore, the mothers and fathers who feel supported in their relationship are more likely to transition to marriage, therefore, policies and programs that emphasize strengthening couples as partners and parents may be the most beneficial to reduce separation and increase marriage.

This study makes a number of contributions. First, this is the first examination of the association between father involvement and coparenting on the union transitions of cohabitators. Prior studies have limited their focus to race/ethnic differences, socioeconomic or fertility factors, and relationship dynamics. Father involvement has been conceptualized as a symbol of commitment to the mother (Levy-Shiff, 1994). I have argued that father involvement is perhaps even more important to cohabiting parents who do not have the legal commitment of marriage.

Therefore, among cohabiting parents, it may be reasonable to suspect the amount of time fathers spend with their children and the quality of the coparenting relationship to be associated with the survival or dissolution of cohabiting unions. Furthermore, as family systems theory posits, relationships in the family (e.g., parent-child) influence other family relationships (e.g., mother-father) that also provide support for the idea that father involvement and coparenting may be important factors in the parents' romantic relationship. Indeed, father involvement and a positive coparenting relationship are associated with a decrease in the odds of separation.

Second, the Fragile Families data are arguably the richest data to answer this research question, as there are prospective, longitudinal measures of father involvement, coparenting, relationship quality and dates of union transitions among cohabiting parents beginning at the child's birth and continuing until their fifth birthday. In addition, unmarried couples were oversampled by a factor of five and thus are most representative of cohabiting fathers and parents in this sample (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Data collected from both parents allows for a couple-level examination of father involvement and coparenting, as well as relationship quality, marital expectations, and a myriad of individual and dyadic characteristics on the union transitions of cohabitators. Prior research has shown that mothers and fathers, on average, report different levels of father involvement that in turn provides evidence that having reports from both parents gives a more complete picture of the family dynamics (Coley & Morris, 2002; Mickelson, 2008; Rinelli, 2009).

Third, the use of the Fragile Families allows for updated estimates for cohabitators' union transitions with recent data. As cohabitation has grown rapidly in recent years and a greater proportion of unmarried births are to cohabiting parents, many surveys are quickly becoming

outdated. The Fragile Families data are arguably the richest available in recent years to answer the current research questions (although not nationally representative).

Although this study makes a number of contributions, the limitations must be addressed. First, a small number of couples who were cohabiting at the child's birth were not followed over time. Couples who were only interviewed at baseline are not included in the analytic sample ( $n = 81$ ). Furthermore, couples who were cohabiting at wave 2 and/or 3 but who were not followed at wave 3 and/or 4 were censored at their last interview date. It is possible that these couples separated and thus did not want to participate in follow-up interviews; however, this cannot be determined. Results are the same whether this group is included or excluded from the sample; however, since their transitions (if applicable) are not captured, the results may be overestimating the likelihood of remaining cohabiting.

Second, coparenting is only measured from the mother. It is possible that mothers may feel supported in their parental role by fathers, but fathers may not feel supported by mothers. Research on maternal gatekeeping has shown that mothers can encourage or inhibit father involvement and those behaviors can lead fathers to feel competent and supported or incompetent and undermined (Shoppe-Sullivan, et al., 2008). Thus, mothers may push fathers away but since they are still being supported, mothers may report a good coparenting relationship while the father feels left out. Similarly, among more gender traditional couples, mothers and fathers may not expect or want fathers to be involved and may be satisfied with that arrangement. Not having available measures of gender traditional ideologies to include with the father involvement and coparenting indicators may limit the applicability of these measures.

The current study shows that coparenting and father involvement are associated with lower odds of separation after the birth of a child, although they are not associated with the odds

of marriage. Other studies document the importance of father involvement and a positive coparenting relationship for the healthy outcomes of children (McLanahan, 2009). This study builds on those by showing that the parental relationship also benefits from fathers working together with mothers to care for children and these dynamics ultimately can result in stable family structures over time, which is beneficial for children and adults. Policies and programs aimed at encouraging father involvement and fostering positive coparental relationships may be a beneficial avenue for strengthening families, particularly those who do not have the legal commitment of marriage.

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Table 1: Means and SE for All Variables (Full Sample = 1,702; Couple-Months = 49,992)		
Variables	Mean	SE
<b>Dependent Variable</b>		
Continuously Cohabit	0.18	0.38
Cohabit to Marry	0.27	0.44
Cohabit to Separate	0.51	0.50
<b>Independent Variables</b>		
<b>Focal Independent Variables</b>		
<i>Parenting Characteristics</i>		
Mother - Father Involvement <sup>^</sup>	3.63	1.89
Father - Father Involvement <sup>^</sup>	4.07	1.85
Coparenting <sup>^</sup>	16.54	2.19
<b>Time</b>		
Duration Before Birth (in months)	31.28	31.37
Year 1	0.35	0.48
Year 2	0.24	0.43
Year 3	0.17	0.38
Year 4	0.13	0.33
Year 5	0.11	0.31
<i>Relationship Characteristics</i>		
Mother - Supportiveness <sup>^</sup>	6.56	1.42
Father - Supportiveness <sup>^</sup>	6.51	1.39
<i>Plans to Marry</i>		
Both Report Plans to Marry	0.82	0.38
Mother Only - Plans to Marry	0.04	0.51
Father Only - Plans to Marry	0.09	0.28
Neither Plans to Marry	0.05	0.21
<b>Father Characteristics</b>		
Father Less than High School	0.38	0.49
Father High School	0.38	0.49
Father Some College	0.20	0.40
Father College	0.04	0.19
Father Age at Birth	26.90	6.69
<b>Mother Characteristics</b>		
Mother Less than High School	0.40	0.49
Mother High School	0.34	0.47
Mother Some College	0.24	0.43
Mother College	0.03	0.17
Mother Age at Birth <sup>a</sup>	24.23	5.48
<b>Child Characteristics</b>		
Gender of Child	0.51	0.50
Child Low Birth Weight	0.10	0.29
Child Health <sup>^</sup>	0.64	0.48

<b>Dyad Characteristics</b>		
<i>Race</i>		
Both White	0.13	0.33
Both Black	0.41	0.49
Both Hispanic	0.30	0.46
Both Other Race	0.01	0.11
Interracial Couple	0.15	0.36
<i>Multi-Partner Fertility</i> <sup>^</sup>		
Focal Child Only	0.32	0.47
Other Biological Children Only	0.18	0.38
Mother has Child by another Dad	0.20	0.40
Father has Child by Another Mom	0.15	0.36
Both Have Children from Other Parents	0.15	0.36
<i>Labor Force Participation</i> <sup>^</sup>		
Both Full-Time	0.53	0.50
Father Only Full-Time	0.33	0.47
Mother Only Full-Time	0.08	0.27
Neither Full-Time	0.06	0.35
Time Difference between M & F Interview <sup>^</sup>	28.44	72.69
Note: ^ indicates time-varying variables. Variables without ^ are measured at T0. <b>Bold</b> indicates significant gender difference. <sup>a</sup> Not used in analysis		

Table 2: Event History Analysis of the Relative Risk of Transitioning to Marriage or Separation vs Remaining Cohabiting (N = 1,702; Couple-Months = 49,992)

Independent Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Marry vs. Remain Cohabiting	Separate vs. Remain Cohabiting	Marry vs. Remain Cohabiting	Separate vs. Remain Cohabiting
<b>Parenting Characteristics</b>				
Mother Reported Father Involvement <sup>^</sup>	1.00	0.95	0.97	0.94 †
Father Reported Father Involvement <sup>^</sup>	1.04	0.95 *	1.03	0.94 **
Coparenting <sup>^</sup>	1.04	0.85 ***	1.01	0.85 ***
<b>Time and Duration Variables</b>				
Duration Before Birth	1.00	1.00 †	1.00	1.00
Year 1	1.52 *	0.67 ***	1.29 *	0.58 ***
Year 2	0.78	0.50 ***	0.75	0.45 ***
Year 3	1.11	0.85	1.09	0.81
Year 4	0.64 †	0.14 ***	0.65 †	0.14 ***
Year 5 or later	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
<b>Relationship Characteristics</b>				
Mother Reported Supportiveness <sup>^</sup>			1.07	0.94 *
Father Reported Supportiveness <sup>^</sup>			1.09 *	0.98
<b>Plans to Marry</b>				
Both Report Plans to Marry			1.00	1.00
Mother Only - Plans to Marry			0.67	0.87 *
Father Only - Plans to Marry			0.65 *	1.08
Neither Plans to Marry			0.48 †	0.98
<b>Father Characteristics</b>				
Father Less than High School			0.97	0.89
Father High School			1.00	1.00
Father Some College			1.09	0.97
Father College			2.27 ***	1.14
Father Age at Birth			1.00	0.97 **
<b>Mother Characteristics</b>				
Mother Less than High School			0.83	1.27 **
Mother High School			1.00	1.00
Mother Some College			1.11	1.09
Mother College			1.93 **	1.06
<b>Child Characteristics</b>				
Gender of Child			1.05	0.93
Child Low Birth Weight			0.97	1.12
Child Health <sup>^</sup>			1.11	1.05
<b>Dyad Characteristics</b>				
<i>Race</i>				
Both White			1.00	1.00
Both Black			0.55 ***	1.38 *
Both Hispanic			0.96	0.68 **
Both Other Race			1.10	1.37
Interracial Couple			0.97	1.17

<i>Multi-Partner Fertility</i> <sup>^</sup>		
Focal Child Only	1.00	1.00
Other Biological Children Only	1.17	0.94
Mother has Child by another Dad	1.12	1.06
Father has Child by Another Mom	0.87	1.40 **
Both Have Children from Other Parents	1.04	1.34 *
<i>Labor Force Participation</i> <sup>^</sup>		
Both Full-Time	1.00	1.00
Father Only Full-Time	1.17	0.94
Mother Only Full-Time	0.75	0.97
Neither Full-Time	1.12	1.04
Time Difference between M & F Interview	1.00 *	1.00
<sup>^</sup> indicates time varying variable; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001		