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Change in perceived relationship quality among unmarried first-time parents was examined using a subsample of the *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing* Study. Mothers (N = 990) and fathers (N = 885) were interviewed at childbirth and one year postpartum. A significant but small decline in perceived relationship quality was found, with mothers experiencing greater decline than fathers. Greater declines were predicted by parents being in steady relationships at childbirth, and for mothers only, fathers' provision of transportation support at childbirth. Less decline was predicted by fathers' presence at childbirth and parents reporting less chance of marriage. For fathers, less education predicted less decrease in perceived relationship quality. Ten recommendations based upon these results are offered for family life educators and clinicians.

PREDICTORS OF CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

AMONG FIRST-TIME UNMARRIED PARENTS

by

Gerard Anthony Carter

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Approved by

Heather M. Helms, Ph.D.
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This effort is dedicated to the three women who have encouraged and supported me

through the years of classes and many months of research and writing of this dissertation:

Eileen McLoughlin Carter

Molly McLoughlin Carter

Charlotte Browne Carter

You make me a better person.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The association between marital quality and parenthood is well established in the

literature (Demo & Cox, 2001; Erel & Burman, 1995; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster,

2003), with LeMasters' (1957) foundational study the basis for future research on

"parenthood as crisis." Although it is now clear that this perspective was too simplistic

(for an early reassessment, see Jacoby, 1969), studies continued to confirm that the

transition to parenthood is often marked by increased marital conflict and decreased

marital satisfaction. At the same time, what is less well understood are changes in

relationship quality for a substantial portion of parents making the transition to

parenthood – unmarried couples. We do know that the relationship environment of

unmarried parents is often marked by a number of individual- and couple-level risks or

stressors, including alcohol and drug abuse (DeKlyen, Brooks-Gunn, McLanahan &

Knab, 2006), physical violence (Charles & Perreira, 2007; Wilson & Brooks-Gunn,

2001), poverty (Amato & Maynard, 2007; Fields, 2003), relationship instability

(Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Bzostek, Carlson, & McLanahan, 2007; Osborne, Manning, &

Smock, 2007; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007), and multipartnered fertility (Carlson &

Furstenberg, 2006). Due to the significant stressors placed upon unmarried parents and

the great potential for relationship disintegration, these have been frequently described as

"fragile families" (Garfinkel, McLanahan, Tienda, & Brooks-Gunn, 2001). Perhaps

because of a tendency to view couple relationships in fragile families as temporary and transitory, and the difficulty of recruiting fathers from among marginalized populations (Costigan & Cox, 2001), considerably fewer studies have focused on understanding relationship quality among unmarried parents, especially during the critical transition for couples from being child-free to being parents.

The import of studying unmarried parents and the quality of their relationships is abundantly clear when considering that the unmarried component of the parenting population has quickly approached normative status, with 70% of Black, 48% of Hispanic, and 25% of White births taking place to unmarried parents (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2007). As a result, government officials (Bush, 2001; Clinton, 1992; Obama, 2008) and academic researchers (e.g., Amato & Maynard) have called for greater focus on understanding and addressing nonmarital childbearing. Entering the forefront of national consciousness after President Lyndon Johnson's 1964 *War on Poverty* and the 1965 *Moynihan Report*, public policy has focused primarily upon reducing nonmarital childbearing as a vehicle for improving the economic and social lives of families. One key component of welfare reform, the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*, specifically addressed the reduction of nonmarital childbearing among teens and increased economic resources for single-parent headed households through child support payments by nonresidential fathers. In addition, 2005 welfare reform legislation included the controversial Healthy Marriage Initiative that continued this emphasis on reducing nonmarital childbearing by providing $150 million annually for marriage promotion and "responsible fatherhood." Although there have been

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strong academic debates questioning the actual benefits of the recent pro-marriage government agenda for families and children (e.g., Kowaleski-Jones & Wolfinger, 2006; Liu & Heiland, 2007), out of this debate has emerged new research focused on the one-third of U.S. families formed by unmarried parents.

In the current study I focus on unmarried first-time parents and have chosen change in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood as my dependent variable. I draw primarily from the life course perspective as the theoretical underpinning for my research questions. This perspective provides an appropriate framework for considering the centrality of transitions occurring for unmarried couples facing a typically unplanned pregnancy and the potential for changes in perceived relationship quality across this transition. For unmarried first-time parents, two major life transitions must be faced simultaneously. First, unmarried couples facing childbirth typically must confront the potential for transition in their relationship as a result of the pregnancy. For example, if cohabiting, do they marry? If dating, do they begin cohabiting? Or, do they go their separate ways? In her qualitative study of cohabitors with children, Reed (2006) found that pregnancy was the key factor associated with couples' transition from uncommitted to more stable cohabiting relationships. In another study of fragile families, 40% of cohabitors transitioned in their relationship status between childbirth and 12 months postpartum, with 14% entering marriage. It is noteworthy that even 2% of those couples not in any type of romantic relationship at pregnancy also transitioned to marriage during their child's first year of life (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2003). Second, because of the decision to carry the pregnancy to

term, these couples rapidly transition from being sexual partners to being "unexpectedly" expectant parents with all the complexities and changes that parenthood brings. In addition to the life course perspective, parent investment theory (Troost & Filsinger, 1993; White & Klein, 2002) is employed to provide further context for considering the transition of pregnancy within a biosocial perspective.

Three primary substantive literatures – (1) marital quality, (2) transition to parenthood, and (3) unmarried couples that become parents – inform the current study, including the selection of variables and the formulation of research questions and hypotheses. Beyond samples composed of cohabiting couples (e.g., Klausli & Owen, 2009), few studies have examined, or theoretically considered, perceived relationship quality for unmarried partners with shared children. Absent a more comprehensive body of research, I make use of studies examining marital quality and parenting as an appropriate, although incomplete, starting point because it is not only possible, but also plausible that in some respects unmarried couples making the transition to parenthood parallel married couples making a similar transition. For example, in a study employing the same dataset used here, Carlson, McLanahan, England, and Devaney (2005) reported that at childbirth, the vast majority of unmarried couples were involved in on-going romantic relationships, had high expectations for marriage with their partner, and mothers received support and commitment from the baby's father. These are relationships in which couples expect at least some degree of permanency or ongoing commitment, with 51% of couples at the time of childbirth cohabiting and another 31% romantically involved but residing separately. Four-fifths of couples indicated a high probability that

their relationship would result in marriage. Over 50% of fathers (and almost all of cohabiting fathers) provided some type of instrumental or social support during this transition period. In these ways, unmarried and married parents may be similar. Clearly, "the vast majority of unwed parents view themselves as families" (Garfinkel et al., 2001, p. 294). At the same time, it is also important to note that the initial commitment to the relationship wanes quickly within the first year postpartum, with a sizable percentage of romantically involved couples no longer in any type of romantic or committed relationship (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2003). As Osborne et al. (2007) point out, although cohabiting parents resemble married parents in many ways because of the close personal relationship, shared housing, and presence of a child, significant differences exist between cohabiting and married parents. Adding to our ability to understand ways in which unmarried parents are unique from married parents, I also rely upon recent analyses published from the nationally representative and longitudinal Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (hereafter referred to as FFCW Study). Refinement of the literature on relationships among unmarried parents is one goal of this current study.

This study has the potential to contribute to the current literature in several ways. First, the study is a timely addition to the burgeoning scholarly literature exploring the relationships among unmarried parents (many of whom are being derived from the FFCW Study data, see Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). Knowing more about relationship quality among unmarried couples is critically important, especially because of potential consequences for child outcomes. For example, in their study of fragile families, Carlson and McLanahan (2006) found a positive association

between parental relationship quality and child outcomes. A better understanding of this critical association has potential benefits for some of the most vulnerable children. Second, this study will move beyond prior research by including cohabitation versus noncohabitation status as a predictor of change in perceived relationship quality among unmarried couples transitioning to parenthood. When unmarried first-time parents have been included in prior studies, comparison has often been made between married and cohabiting couples (e.g., Kluwer & Johnson, 2007) but with only 51% of unmarried parents cohabiting, sizable minorities of parenting couples are excluded from analysis. Third, because family life education is especially interested in transitions across the lifespan (e.g., parenting education, premarital education, divorce education and intervention), this study has the potential to contribute to what we understand about the parenting transition for a large portion of contemporary families. Study results will be considered in light of the call to develop educational intervention programs that can effectively improve the lives of fragile families (Carlson & McLanahan, 2006; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). For example, educational intervention might target fathers' involvement if this is found to predict favorable change in perceived relationship quality.

Conceptual Model

Building on prior research and public policies encouraging healthy relationships within families of unmarried parents, and based upon the explicit assumption that what occurs *before* and *at* birth matters *after* birth, predictors of change in perceived relationship quality measured at childbirth and again one year later among unmarried first-time parents are examined. Childbirth is a pivotal event possessing tremendous

potential to impact relationships of unmarried first-time parents (England & Edin, 2007; Reed, 2006), and through the addition of an infant, the dyadic relationship – even if fragile and unstable – is irrevocably transformed into a parenting relationship. In order to consider one aspect of the transition of unmarried couples to parenthood, two key research questions are addressed in this study: (1) Among unmarried first-time parents, how does perceived relationship quality change during the transition from childbirth to one year postpartum? (2) What factors predict the change in perceived relationship quality as measured at childbirth and again one year postpartum?

Expected Declines in Perceived Relationship Quality

As well noted by Belsky and colleagues, relationship quality varies among couples transitioning to parenthood with a majority of couples experiencing at least some decline in love and increases in conflict (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Belsky & Rovine, 1990). Using the FFCW Study dataset, it is expected that most unmarried couples will report decreases in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood. For other couples, the transition to parenthood is expected to be associated with improved perceptions of relationship quality. It is also expected that some couples will remain constant in their perceptions of relationship quality across this transition. The outcome variable, perceived relationship quality, consists of four items self-reported separately by mothers and fathers at childbirth (Wave 1) and one year postpartum (Wave 2).

Expected Predictors of Change in Perceived Relationship Quality

To examine the factors predictive of change in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood, a number of independent variables are considered.

These predictors consist of potential risk and protective factors for couples making this transition.

Gender is considered first as a predictor in this conceptual model because although results are somewhat mixed, studies have generally reported at least modest gender differences on measures of relationship quality (Rogers & Amato, 2000; Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996) and this is especially true during the transition to parenthood (Twenge et al., 2003). The most robust finding is that relationship quality tends to decline for parents across the transition to parenthood and that mothers generally experience greater declines than fathers (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; for an exception, see Kurdek, 1999). Increases or stability in marital satisfaction among parenting couples were reported for wives when husbands expressed fondness towards their wives and were engaged in the relationship. Declines in wives' relationship quality were predicted by husbands' negative attitudes toward their wives, husbands' disappointment with their wives, or when couples described their lives as chaotic (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000).

What additionally accounts for this decline, especially among women? Perhaps most importantly, the transition to parenthood involves increased household and child care tasks. Women are typically responsible for the majority of the household tasks (McHale & Huston, 1985), and they typically perform twice as many of these tasks as men (Coltrane, 2000). This is not surprising because couples tend toward more traditional divisions of household labor following childbirth (Belsky & Pensky, 1988). In a study of chores and child care among a sample of predominantly married couples, Kroska (2003)

found that mothers were more likely to highly evaluate feeding, bathing, diapering, and dressing their own child as something good and as something that made them feel powerful. Reinforcing other findings related to gendered division of household labor, fathers were more likely to highly evaluate "masculine chores" such as maintaining the family car or doing outdoor work for the family as something good and as a symbol of personal power. Mothers frequently viewed mothering tasks as particularly salient and tended to be more depressed when they perceived an imbalance between their own expectations and the actual child care they provide (Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004). The gendered notion that biological mothers are the primary infant caregivers can be seen in a study of lesbian parenting couples, where although household work was evenly divided, biological mothers tended to do more of the childcare (Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007). In addition to the stresses and strains of increased household tasks, unequal division of household labor, and new child care responsibilities, fatigue is an added pressure on couple functioning. Couples almost always experience fatigue after childbirth, with fathers experiencing a greater change in fatigue than mothers (but not actually more fatigue). Mothers' but not fathers' fatigue was related to declines in her relationship quality (Elek, Hudson, & Fleck, 2002).

In addition to gender, young age at childbirth, less education, short relationship duration, not cohabiting, and poor health are expected to be associated with greater decreases in perceived relationship quality. Attendance at religious services, higher estimation of the likelihood or chance of marriage, being in a steady relationship, fathers' presence at childbirth, fathers' provision of money, fathers' provision of transportation

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support, and joint activities with one's partner are expected to be associated with less decline in perceived relationship quality.

Gender as a Moderator of the Association between Predictor Variables and Change in Perceived Relationship Quality

The conceptual model takes into account the possibility of gender as a moderator of the relationships between other predictor variables and change in perceived relationship quality. As a moderator, gender is expected to specify the conditions under which the associations between the independent variables predict change in perceived relationship quality. For example, it might be that young age at childbirth predicts change in perceived relationship quality for mothers but not for fathers. Because of expected gender differences in the experience of transitioning to parenthood, the potential of gender to moderate the relationships between all study predictor variables and the change in perceived relationship quality will be examined.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of the Theoretical Frameworks

Human beings experience a number, variety, and sequencing of transitions across the lifespan. Families as well develop and change across time through short- and long-term formations, separations, dissolutions, and reconfigurations. In our Western culture, a considerable array of typical transitions emerge after birth that demarcate major points of transformation of individuals and the families within which they are members – for example, entering formal education, becoming sexually active, attending college or entering the workforce, marriage, parenthood, divorce, and widow(er)hood. Rather than viewing the transitions of individuals within families as consisting of a series of sequential developmental tasks to be successfully and successively completed (White & Klein, 2002), recent theoretical developments have situated major life transitions as taking on particular social meanings, existing within certain historical periods and personal timelines, being ascribed psychological meaning, and frequently resulting in changes to the trajectories and options accessible to the individual (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Rodgers & White, 1993).

The life course perspective has emerged as an important theoretical tool for understanding individual and family development and change across the lifespan (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; White & Klein, 2002). Due to its applicability to the stress

associated with particular transitions such as pregnancy, the life course perspective is useful in studying the transition to parenthood by unmarried couples. Five life course perspective concepts are especially applicable to the current study: (1) stages and transitions; (2) the timing and sequencing of transitions; (3) the interplay of historical time and personal experiences; (4) human agency; and (5) linked lives (Demo, Aquilino, & Fine, 2005; Elder, 1994).

The Life Course Perspective

  Stages and transitions. According to the life course perspective, a "stage is an interval of time in which the structure and interactions of role relationships in the family are noticeably and qualitatively distinct from other periods of time" (White & Klein, 2002, p. 97). Stages are typically inferred from a fundamental change in family membership (e.g., the entry of a baby) or the ways in which family relationships are organized (e.g., unmarried sexual partners becoming parents). From the moment childbirth has taken place, and the decision is made to parent the child, a fundamental transition has begun in a couple's relationship from the stage of being child-free to a new stage of being parents. Transitions are indicated by those events that occur between family life stages. In the focus of the current study, the key transition involves the event of childbirth.

  As discussed previously, the transition to parenthood is typically stressful for most couples and it can have a significant impact upon the quality of couple relationships (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Strong support exists in the literature for recognizing that relationship quality changes over the transition to parenthood (Belsky & Rovine, 1990),

with relationship quality decreasing for many couples during the transition to parenthood (Demo & Cox, 2001; Twenge et al., 2003). During this transition, marital conflict generally increases (Cowan et al, 1985; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007) and marital satisfaction generally decreases (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Lawrence, Nylen, & Cobb, 2007). At the same time, it has also been found that for some couples relationship quality remains the same or actually increases across the transition to parenthood for some couples (Levy-Shiff, 1994; Shapiro et al., 2000).

But what about perceived relationship quality for unmarried couples transitioning from the stage of being child-free to the stage of parenthood? Drawing from the premarital cohabitation and couple commitment literature, the processes involved in relationship transitions are important considerations in understanding how couples fare in their relationships. Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) in their discussion of "sliding versus deciding" among cohabiting couples, make note of the tendency among couples to slide into cohabitation by "inertia" rather than by design ("deciding"). Citing the work of Manning and Smock (2005), the authors argue "that many, if not most, couples slide from noncohabitation to cohabitation before fully realizing what is happening; it is often a nondeliberative and incremental process" (Stanley et al., p. 505). Sliding into more committed relationships, as can be the case with pregnancy, can be problematic because couples sometimes remain in relationships that they otherwise would have exited. Or, with the basis of the relationship built upon noncommitment, an otherwise healthy relationship might not be able to withstand normal stresses and strains inherent with parenting.

Surra and colleagues conducted research along complementary lines into the processes of relationship commitment among premarital couples (Surra, 1987; Surra, Arizzi, & Asmussen, 1988; Surra & Hughes, 1997). Of particular interest is Surra and Hughes' work on relationship-driven (e.g., couple evaluates how well they were matched) versus event-driven (e.g., pregnancy) reasons to enter into more committed relationships. Study results indicated that women in event-driven relationships experienced more conflict, had more ambivalence about the relationship, and had lower relationship satisfaction. For men, ambivalence about the relationship was higher among event-driven couples and satisfaction was lower. No difference in love was found between relationship-driven or event-driven couples. These findings suggest that fragile couples transitioning to parenthood as unmarried couples are likely sliding from stage to stage based upon the event of pregnancy rather than a deliberate decision based on the strength of their relationship as a couple. So, not only is the transition to parenthood difficult for most couples, but unmarried couples potentially face even greater hazards to forming satisfying relationships. Still, it is important to recall Demo and Cox's (2001) conclusion drawn from a review of the literature "that after an initial disruption, most couples also seem to be doing well" after the transition to parenthood (p. 97).

Timing and sequencing of transitions. The life course perspective posits that the timing and sequencing of life transitions can be quite varied, with social norms frequently defining events as occurring "on time," "early," "late," or "ill- timed" (Demo et al., 2005). The consequences of the timing and sequencing of transitions, depending upon the reference group, often impacts the trajectories of individuals and families. For example,

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the transition to parenthood as a young unmarried couple may go against prevailing

social norms by occurring at the "wrong" time and being out of sequence, with potential

ramifications for the couple. Early and out-of-sequence transition to parenthood may

encourage a couple to "rectify" an unplanned pregnancy by prematurely entering or

sustaining a relationship that they otherwise would not (Reed, 2006), including being in a

relationship that is less healthy, more risky, and with diminished access to economic

resources (DeKlyen et al., 2006). So, in addition to the normal stresses associated with

the transition to parenthood, these relationships are potentially laden with additional

stressors that can influence perceived relationship quality. Studies have confirmed

linkages between the impact of stressors and marital quality (Karney & Bradbury, 1995;

Williams, 1995a; Williams 1995b) and specifically between the association of stress

during pregnancy with marital discord (Brown, 1994) and marital satisfaction (Chandler,

1998).

Historical time and personal experiences. Individuals and families do not exist

in vacuums, but rather function within particular historical worlds that have potency to

exert influence on how lives are lived and social meanings are constructed. Life course

analysis takes into account the particular historical timeframes and social worlds

individuals and families inhabit and construct. For example, nonmarital sexual practices,

including premarital conception and birth, cannot be fully understood distinct from the

historical shift of sexual behaviors (Finer, 2007) and mores (Harding & Jencks, 2003)

that were influenced by medical advances in oral contraceptives and the social rights and

liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s. The warnings issued by leading family

scholars just decades ago against violating the moral codes against premarital sexual activity (e.g., Duvall & Hill, 1943) perhaps best define a prior generational paradigm (e.g., "first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Suzy with the baby carriage"; White & Klein, 2002, p. 101). With nonmarital childbearing rising steadily over the past four decades and the majority of Black and Hispanic children conceived outside of marriage (Bachu, 1998), the meaning attached to the sequencing of normative individual and family transitions may well have changed over time. Contrary to the content of much of the public debates, the transition to nonmarital parenthood by itself may not necessarily constitute a source of extra stress because the *meaning* attached to the sequencing of this transition may be socially-normed differently for the current generation of reproductive partners. It is now clear from research studies that many unmarried couples transitioning to parenthood do not view the need to "rectify" the "problem of an unexpected pregnancy" by entering into formal relationships, including marriage (Gibson-Davis, 2007; Reed, 2006). It may be that for some unmarried couples the transition to parenthood and the mother's likely status as the single head-of-household is a normative experience that carries limited expectations for direct father support or involvement. For example, Linnenberg (2007) reported in her qualitative study of fragile families that of the fifty-seven fathers surveyed, seven were only marginally involved with their children but also were engaged in happy couple relationships. If this holds true, father support or his involvement might have limited impact upon the quality of some couples' relationship.

Human agency. As humans transition across the lifespan it is critical to recall that "[w]ithin the constraints of their world, people are planful and make choices among the options that construct their life course" (Elder, 1994, p. 6). The transition to parenthood by unmarried couples is most frequently unintended (Edin, England, Shafer, & Reed, 2007; Korenman, Kaestner, & Joyce, 2001), but at the same time this transition also marks an opportunity for each partner to determine both the meaning attached to the event and to make choices regarding their own behavioral responses. For example, a father may choose the pregnancy as an opportunity to invest in his offspring or as reason to absent himself from the entire couple relationship. Or, a mother may have had a poor or nonexistent relationship with the father of her child yet may make purposeful decisions to engage her child's father in building a strong and attached coparenting relationship.

Linked lives. Human beings are social by nature and are linked across the lifespan with family, friends, and communities (Demo et al., 2005; Elder, 1994). In the case of unmarried parents, it is the existence of a shared child that serves to link partners together across the lifespan. It is clear from prior studies that romantic relationships and cohabitation often do not last among unmarried couples transitioning to parenthood (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2003). Although sexual contact between partners may wane over time and fathers may not remain in close physical contact with their baby's mother, the interconnectedness of social relationships between partners is irrevocably altered with the addition of the child. Whether referenced as a "father" or a "daddy" (Monte, 2007), through their child fathers frequently remain in at least some contact and relationship with their baby's mother. In post-divorce studies, 70% to 75% of children

have at least some contact with their nonresidential fathers (King, 1994; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1994). In their initial baseline study of fragile families, McLanahan, Garfinkel, Reichman, and Teitler (2001), reported that 90% of unmarried fathers intended to contribute to their child's support and 93% of mothers wanted fathers to be involved. The linkages of lives between unmarried parents via their shared child is perhaps best summarized by Linnenberg (2007) in her review of fathering among fragile families: "…when relationship quality is good, men may want to spend more time with their partners. Because women and their infants are often a package deal, more or less, the time these men spend with their partners may be family time by default" (p. 161).

In summary, the life course perspective provides an appropriate theoretical context within which to consider changes in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood among unmarried first-time parents. The transition into parenthood is associated with factors that protect or undermine perceived relationship quality across time. The timing and sequencing of pregnancy among unmarried parents may launch couples onto trajectories that may involve engagement in relationships that are less stable, less healthy, more risky, and less satisfying. At the same time, it is important to note that the social meaning attached to pregnancy separate from marriage may not be the same for all generations and populations. As well, humans have tremendous capacity to exert their own influences upon their trajectories, so there exists variation of responses to factors associated with relationship quality during this transition. Finally, with its emphasis on linked lives, the life course perspective provides an apt

vehicle for considering the fragile and often tenuous relationships of unmarried couples and the quality of the relationship they share across the transition to parenthood.

Parent Investment Theory

Central to the biosocial perspective, human behavior cannot be explained solely from psychosocial or environmental contexts but must also be considered in light of the biological nature of human beings, including the influence of evolutionary forces. Although the earliest scholarly applications of evolutionary and biosocial thinking to the human experience were frequently tied to ill-conceived, ideologically biased, and theoretically unjustifiable Social Darwinism, the study of humans as social *and* biological beings has gained academic standing during the past four decades with theoretical advances in animal sciences, anthropology (Troost & Filsinger, 1993), and the development of the ecological approaches of Hook and Paolucci (1970) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) (for a basic discussion see Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). In their review of biosocial perspectives on the family, Booth, Carver, and Granger (2000) made note of an anticipated explosion of research studies connecting the biological and psychosocial study of families and argued for the necessity of family scholars learning "to speak the common language" of biologists (p. 1031). In large measure recent incorporation of the biosocial perspective into the study of families resulted from the rejection of simplistic and deterministic models offered in earlier scientific writings in favor of broader understandings of linkages and reciprocity between the human biological and psychosocial spheres.

Parent Investment Theory (PIT) is a specific extension of the biosocial

perspective focused on explaining and predicting differential outcomes associated with

parental investment in offspring. Trivers' (1972, 2002) work in sexual selection from an

evolutionary biological perspective provided the foundation for much of the subsequent

theoretical work into the investment reproductive partners are willing to make in their

offspring. Trivers defined parental investment "as any investment by the parent in an

individual offspring that increases the offspring's chance of surviving (and hence

reproductive success)" (2002, p. 67). Key PIT hypotheses hold that gender differences

exist in parental investment and are based in part on the regulation of reproductive access

and mate selectivity. Because they must bear the physical costs associated with

pregnancy and are typically responsible for much of the postpartum child care, mothers

typically seek to limit access to the fittest partner who will help ensure the survival of

offspring through provision of food, protection, coparenting, etc. If mothers select

partners that show investment in their offspring, it can be expected that they will limit

access (both sexual and nonsexual access) to partners deemed less able or willing to

provide support. Further, when mothers limit access to their partners they are less likely

to engender positive couple relationships and perceived relationship quality is

diminished. As a corollary, it is expected that supportive fathers will seek greater access

to their reproductive partners and that maintaining relationship quality will equally take

on special importance.

In summary, how does PIT inform this study? Prior to the birth of a first child (the

sample employed here) mothers may engage in sexual relationships without a clear idea

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of selecting partners that are investors in her or in a potential child. However, once the reality of childbirth has occurred, from a biosocial perspective, mothers would be expected to maintain relationships with fathers who make clear overtures of support and investment in her life and her new child. For example, fathers who are present at the hospital at the time of childbirth, provide money, and give rides during the pregnancy have established track records of investment with their baby's mother and their shared child. It is therefore expected that mothers are more likely to permit invested fathers into their lives and to seek relationships with them. PIT provides the general context within which it is predicted that investments made by fathers during pregnancy or at childbirth will contribute to a lessening of the decline in relationship quality that typically occurs across the transition to parenthood.

Review of the Empirical Literature: Support for the Study Variables

"Only with information concerning the prebirth characteristics of the couple and their relationship…can one begin to understand the ways in which becoming a parent precipitates changes in the marital relationship and the individual parents, the variety of responses to that change, and the processes of change over time" (Cox, 1985, p. 396).

Outcome Variable - Change in Perceived Relationship Quality Across the Transition to Parenthood

Perceived relationship quality was chosen as the outcome variable for this study because even in the absence of physical proximity (e.g., incarceration), unmarried parents' ability to maintain a workable relationship may well be particularly salient for their shared child (e.g., Carlson & McLanahan, 2006). Studies conducted with samples of

married couples (Demo & Cox, 2001) and nonresidential parents (e.g., Harper & Fine, 2006) are consistent that parental relationship quality is an important predictor of numerous child outcomes. As a result, the study of perceived relationship quality among unmarried parents remains a critically important but under-explored area of family life research.

Perceived relationship quality as operationalized in this study focuses on emotional supportiveness of partners (e.g., appraisals of partners' fairness and willingness to compromise, ability to express affection or love, encouragement, and avoidance of being critical) who have been in some type of romantic relationship at childbirth (Wave 1) or one year postpartum (Wave 2). Emotional supportiveness helps foster within the relationship a healthy psychological environment. Emotional supportiveness as an indicator of perceived relationship quality has been used in a number of publications derived from the FFCW Study dataset (e.g., Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, Matthews, & Carrano, 2007; Carlson & McLanahan, 2006; Gibson-Davis & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Osborne et al., 2007). In a study by Carlson and McLanahan, married and cohabiting couples reported significantly higher levels of emotional supportiveness as compared with visiting couples. Across all relationship types, emotional supportiveness in general declined across the transition to parenthood. At the same time, higher levels of emotional supportiveness appear to be protective against relationship separation (Osborne et al.).

Although outside the scope of this current study, it is important to recall that emotional supportiveness may differ considerably depending upon the type of

romantically linked relationship parents are engaged in with each other – cohabiting, steady, or not currently steady. For example, it may be that avoidance of criticism (one of the items comprising the measure of perceived relationship quality) is particularly salient for cohabiting couples who interact on a daily basis but not for couples engaged in nonresidential but non-steady relationships.

Predictor Variables

The predictor variables were chosen because of their applicability to inform family life educators and clinicians about the nature of these fragile relationships. There are certainly additional predictor variables of potential interest but the ones selected represent both background characteristics (e.g., education, age at childbirth) not particularly amenable to intervention as well as ones that could potentially be impacted by program interventions (e.g., father support). In light of the importance of relationship quality for parents – married or unmarried –, understanding predictors of changes in perceived relationship quality provides a powerful tool to inform knowledge about unmarried parents and for contributing to the development of intervention programs.

Gender. Although results are somewhat mixed, studies have generally reported at least modest gender differences on measures of marital quality (e.g., Rogers & Amato, 2000; Umberson et al., 1996). Once again drawing from the marital literature, it is expected that gender might predict changes in perceived relationship quality and that gender might moderate the associations of the predictor variables and change in perceived relationship quality by specifying under what conditions the independent variables operate. Therefore, the association between the study independent variables and

perceived relationship quality will be tested for gender differences. In this study, it is expected that mothers will experience greater declines in perceived relationship quality across this transition than fathers.

Age at childbirth. The associations between age and transition to normative adult developmental stages of marriage and parenthood are well established in the literature (Faust & McKibben, 1999). For example, in a study of 128 couples transitioning to first-time parenthood, Belsky and Rovine (1990) found young age associated with declines in marital quality (especially in the area of increased conflict) for both husbands and wives. Utilizing data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, Bramlett and Mosher (2001) reported that the probability of first marriage disruption within 18 months was twice as high for wives entering marriage at less than 18 years of age (10%) as compared with wives entering marriage at 25 years or older (5%). By ten years of marriage, this difference continued with the probability of marital dissolution for young wives at 48% and half that amount (24%) for wives marrying after 25 years of age. The connection between age and marital quality has been frequently explained using a life course perspective, with off-timed entrance into marriage associated with couples lacking the maturity to competently engage in the responsibilities of marriage. "Frequently, couples who marry early are inadequately prepared for the emotional responsibilities of marriage…[and they] often have unrealistic expectations for marriage that are gleaned from the media or may feel overwhelmed by the new and challenging roles they are forced to assume" (Faust & McKibben, p. 482). In a similar way, the lifecourse transition to the adult responsibilities of parenthood and maintaining a quality co-parenting

relationship are impacted by young age at entrance. Studies have found that delayed

timing of pregnancy (i.e., older age) for mothers was associated with greater maturity, the

ability to more fully enter into adult relationships, and an improved ability to form

healthy relationships (Bouchard, Lachance-Grzela, & Goguen, 2008). Younger age at

pregnancy, especially for women, has been associated with increased distress (Morse,

Buist, & Durkin, 2000). For adolescent fathers, young age has been linked in studies with

increased stress, potentially reduced competency to parent, and difficulties with the

baby's mother (Fagan, Bernd, & Whiteman, 2007). In this study, younger age at

childbirth is expected to be associated with greater decreases in perceived relationship

quality across the transition to parenthood.

Religious attendance. In a meta-analysis of 94 studies published between 1980

and 1999, Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank (2001) reported small to

modest concurrent associations between religiosity and marital satisfaction. Associations

between denominational affiliation (most studies are conducted with samples of

Christians) and marital satisfaction were weak (mean $r = 0.05$). Associations between

church attendance and marital satisfaction were stronger, albeit still modest (mean $r = 0.07$). The strongest associations between religiosity and marital satisfaction were found

in studies of religious practice (e.g., frequency of Bible reading, prayer) and personal

religiousness (e.g., importance of religion to the individual), with mean $r = 0.15$.

Employing a convenience sample of racially-diverse young adults, Fincham, Beach,

Lambert, Stillman, and Braitwaite (2008) found the religious practice of prayer positively

associated with relationship satisfaction. The association between religiosity and marital

quality has also been found cross-culturally in studies of Israeli Arabs (Lev-Wiesel & Al-Krenawi, 1999), Protestant Chinese Americans (Ing, 1999), the Igbo people in Nigeria (Owuamanam, 2000), and Koreans (Kim, 2003).

Wilcox and Wolfinger (2006) in their study of the association between religiosity and marital transition among fragile families, suggested that the connection between faith and relationship outcomes might be due in part to the stress alleviation that occurs when couples are linked within their church communities. Although their relationships may not end in marriage, religion might play an important role in fostering the linking of lives among mother, father, and a calling by the local faith community for commitment and sacrifice. In this study, religious attendance is expected to be associated with less decrease in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood. It must be noted that available data in the current study only includes religious affiliation and church attendance, not religious practices and personal religiousness, so two of the strongest predictors of religious influence cannot be tested. Because there is limited theory and weak research basis for the association between religious affiliation and perceived relationship quality, only church attendance and not religious affiliation will be considered here.

Chance of marriage. The expectation that marriage is likely is a typical belief of many unmarried parents (Waller, 2001). In a sample drawn from the FFCW Study, over 80% of cohabiting mothers and fathers reported that marriage was likely (Carlson et al., 2005). Drawing from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Gassanov, Nicholson, and Koch-Turner (2008) found that parenting and pregnant teens were

significantly more likely to be certain that marriage would occur within the next five years as compared with childless youth. In predicting the association between estimated chance of marriage and change in perceived relationship quality one year postpartum, it is important to include the work by Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan (2005) who investigated the discrepancy between expectations for marriage and the reality that most fragile families do not transition from cohabitation to marriage. For many of these couples, especially mothers, there were high hopes for marriage but even higher expectations. Because there were such high expectations of marriage, unmarried parents often hesitated to enter a union without certain financial and relationship qualities in place. Although marriage may be delayed because of the "problem of finding a viable mate" (Huston & Melz, 2004), Reed (2006) reported in her qualitative study that cohabitors saw that "by living together, they can share expenses and parenting responsibilities and get to know each other better" (p. 1127). In the *short term*, the hope for marriage may serve as a protective factor by binding a couple together as they share the taxing responsibilities of new parenthood and may provide a vehicle to consider whether this is a viable mate. At the same time, longer term delay of marriage among unmarried parents may erode perceived relationship quality as expectations for marriage and commitment fail to be realized. In the longer term, couples may have better perceived relationship quality if they were more realistic, did not expect marriage, and sought ways to cooperatively coparent. With the focus on transition during the first year postpartum, in this study having a higher estimation of the likelihood (chance) of marriage is expected

to be associated with less decline in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood.

Education. Lower levels of education, especially among women, have been found to be associated with marital disruption (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Kurdek, 1993). Although frequently found as a correlate of relationship quality or stability, I am unaware of convincing arguments providing a rationale for this association. Two possible explanations may provide some insight, though. In their study of the link between education and indicators of subjective quality of life, Ross and Van Willigen (1997) found that higher levels of education predicted lower levels of emotional stress. Perhaps increased education provides access to cognitive outlets for confronting and ameliorating stress (e.g., self help books, yoga). Awareness of avenues for reducing stress within a relationship would be expected to serve as a protective factor against decline in perceived relationship quality. It may also be that education really functions as a proxy for social class or economic advantage (e.g., Smock & Greenland, 2010) and that lower education taps into additional stressors placed upon couple relationships due to accompanying limitations on financial resources available to the couple. In this study, higher levels of education are expected to be associated with less decline in perceived relationship quality.

Relationship duration. Although the couple relationship duration prior to pregnancy has received little attention in the literature, studies have found support for the association between courtship duration and marital satisfaction and stability (Hansen, 2006; Niehuis, 2006). Hansen, for example, reported that married couples that dated

28

longer before marriage reported being happier with their relationships. Additionally, still

married couples (as opposed to couples that divorced) dated an average of 12 additional

months prior to marriage. It may be that couples without sufficient time to evaluate the

sufficiency or appropriateness of their partner might select less than ideal mates. In a

similar manner, pregnancy can truncate the process of mate selection, with couples in

shorter duration relationships linked together when they might not otherwise do so. In

this study, shorter relationship duration prior to pregnancy is expected to be associated

with greater decreases in perceived relationship quality across the transition to

parenthood.

Cohabitation. Cohabitation has been robustly linked in the literature with poor

relationship outcomes (for a meta-analysis, see Jose, O'Leary, & Moyer, 2010). The

cohabitation effect has been explored on the basis of lack of commitment by partners to

the relationship (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman,

2004), differences in socioeconomics and class, and differences in problem solving skills

between cohabiting couples and married couples (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). How does

this apply to noncohabiting parents? In a study of married, cohabiting, and noncohabiting

parents, DeKlyen et al. (2006) reported that the relationship environments among

noncohabiting parents were worse than that of cohabiting parents. For example,

nonromantically involved noncohabiting mothers were more likely to report generalized

anxiety than cohabiting mothers. Romantically involved noncohabiting mothers were also

more likely than cohabiting mothers to report the use of illicit drugs during the previous

month. Noncohabiting fathers were more likely than cohabiting fathers to report a major

depressive episode. Romantically involved noncohabiting fathers were more likely to report heavy drinking during the past month and having been incarcerated as compared with cohabiting fathers. Taken together, being a parent in a noncohabiting relationship appears to be associated with personal difficulties that have the potential to negatively impact perceived relationship quality. In this study, being in a noncohabiting relationship at childbirth is expected to be associated with greater declines in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood.

Relationship status. Being in steady relationships does appear to benefit couples. In a study of fragile families, Fagan and Palkovitz (2007) found that fathers who were only acquaintances with their baby's mother at childbirth had poorer quality relationships as compared with fathers that were friends or romantic partners. Friends-only fathers, in turn, had poorer relationships with their baby's mother than fathers in romantic relationships. In a study of fragile families, DeKlyen et al. (2006) detailed the association between relationship status and problems (e.g., anxiety, illicit drug use, father incarceration) that place couples' perceived relationship quality at risk. In a study of dating relationships among college women, Khanchandani and Durham (2009) found that jealousy was lower for women in steady relationships as compared with those in non-steady relationships. Being in a steady relationship was associated with higher levels of well-being as compared to being in a casual dating relationship or in no dating relationship at all (Dush & Amato, 2005). In this study, being in a steady relationship at childbirth is expected to be associated with less decline in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood.

Health. Marital quality has been associated with overall health (Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger, & Elder, 1997). Within the marital context, Booth and Johnson (1994) have argued that the linkage between health and relationship outcomes may be explained by other financial and relationship variables such as uncertain finances, changes in division of household labor after childbirth, and problematic behaviors of one or both spouses. In this vein, health may serve as a proxy for a number of other relationship type variables among married couples. Within the fragile families considered here, a supported link between health and changes in perceived relationship quality might also be attributed to well-documented health disparities frequently attributed to race and economic class (Kawachi, Daniels, & Robinson, 2005). For example, unmarried mothers without partners (frequently the most economically disadvantaged) have five times the risk of delivering a premature infant as compared with married mothers (Young & Declercq, 2010). It may be that poor health is limiting to single mothers because it is yet another symptom of their poverty status. For fathers, poor health might be perceived as an indication of weaker economic vitality and may be viewed through a lens similar to that which is used to decide upon a man's suitability for marriage (for a discussion of what low-income women say about marriage see Edin, 2000). The caveat, then, is to interpret any significant associations between health and change in perceived relationship quality through a lens that includes the potential influence of poverty rather than simply how healthy one is. In this study, poorer health is expected to be associated with decreases in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood.

Father involvement. In general, involvement of fathers in the lives of their partners and children has been found to be associated with relationship quality among married and unmarried couples. Studies during the past two decades have suggested that being an involved father was associated with increased marital satisfaction (Belsky, 1984; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Snarey, 1993), or at least less decline in marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood (Levy-Shiff, 1994). Results from a study of young married and unmarried mothers suggested an association between father involvement and parental relationship quality (Gee, McNerney, Reiter, & Leaman, 2007). Using bivariate correlations, fathers' participation at birth has been linked with emotional support and a reduction in relationship conflict (Coley & Hernandez, 2006). Partner social support has been found to be associated with increased marital quality (Dehle, 2007) and reduced anxiety during pregnancy (Rini, Schetter, Hobel, Glynn, & Sandman, 2006). Mothers' marital satisfaction has been found to be associated with mothers' reports of husband involvement (Ramonetti, 2007). The link between father involvement and relationship quality has also been found cross-culturally. In a study of 659 Japanese married women, for example, husbands' emotional support was found to be associated with wife's marital satisfaction (Yamato, 2008). Although Lee and Doherty (2007) found support for the association between father involvement and marital satisfaction, they added the caveat that some longitudinal studies have also found no association between father involvement and relationship quality.

Father involvement among the sample population studied here presents a unique challenge because of the specific timeframe being considered – namely, during the first

year of transition to parenthood. Typically, father involvement considers frequency of active engagement in parenting activities such as playing games or reading. However, it would be too limiting to conclude that father involvement only begins postpartum. Although limited in their interactions with the child during the pregnancy, fathers can be involved and engaged through expressions of support provided to their baby's mother. Gibson-Davis and Brooks-Gunn (2007) operationalized father involvement in terms of father's behavior prior to birth (e.g., running errands) and at childbirth (e.g., having his name on the birth certificate). As operationalized in this study, fathers' presence at the hospital, fathers' provision of money, and fathers' provision of transportation support are three ways in which fathers communicate their involvement. In this study, father involvement is expected to be associated with less decline in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood.

      Activities with partner. The link between participating in joint activities with one's partner and relationship quality is supported in the literature (Burgess & Cottrell, 1939; Smith, Snyder, Trull, & Monsma, 1988). Engaging in joint activities with a partner is important because it fosters relationship quality through opportunities for communication, problem solving, and togetherness (Holman, & Jacquart, 1988). Crawford, Houts, Huston, and George (2002) reported an interesting nuance of the assumed relationship between engagement in leisure activities and marital quality. They found support for the overall association between leisure and marital quality, but differing gender patterns. For men, engaging with their wives in joint activities that they both liked was associated only with his satisfaction. Engaging in joint activities that only

the husband enjoyed, conversely, was associated with lower satisfaction among wives. Integrating findings from the larger literature with the gendered pattern of results reported by Crawford et al., participation in joint activities in this study is expected to be associated with less decline in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood. The possibility, however, that this association may be moderated by gender will also be examined.

Summary and Statement of Hypotheses

The current study investigates predictors of change in perceived relationship quality measured at childbirth and again one year later. The predictor variables examined in this study are those frequently found in the literature as being associated with perceived relationship quality and with the transition to parenthood.

The life course perspective (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Demo et al., 2005; Elder, 1994; White & Klein, 2002) provides the primary theoretical backdrop for the current study because of its applicability to the transition to parenthood. From the life course perspective, stressors associated with the transition to parenthood might be accentuated by the off-timing and out-of-sequencing of nonmarital childbirth. Theory would suggest that transitioning to unmarried parenthood is likely to place couple perceived relationship quality at risk, with couples making this transition often at a young age, with less education, and with short relationship duration. At the same time, certain predictors such as attendance at religious services, estimation of a higher chance of marriage, and being in a steady relationship could be expected to predict less decline in perceived relationship quality because they may provide a supportive social and relationship environment that

reduces the stresses of the transition to unmarried parenthood. It also expected that social

norms are changing, with nonmarital childbearing approaching normative status. Thus,

for example, the association between some "risk" predictor variables included in this

study might not be associated as expected with negative changes in perceived relationship

quality. In addition, it is important to be mindful that at least some of the variance of

responses is most likely due to the human agency of individuals in crafting their own

unique response to a nonmarital pregnancy. Therefore, theory would suggest a natural

variation in responses to a premarital pregnancy. For some unmarried parents, the

transition to parenthood would be expected to predict increases in perceived relationship

quality. Finally, the life course perspective provides the critical construct of linked lives

as a theoretical tool for considering why the transition to parenthood among fragile

unmarried couples is a relevant and important focus of study.

This study is further informed by the use of parent investment theory (PIT). PIT

provides a context for considering predictors of change in perceived relationship quality.

For example, when fathers are invested with their baby's mother, it is expected that both

parents are more likely to rate their perceived relationship quality as higher. Therefore,

theory would suggest that fathers' presence at childbirth, fathers' provision of money and

transportation support, and engaging in joint activities with one's partner would predict

less decline in perceived relationship quality.

The following research questions are posed and hypotheses tested in the current

study: *Among unmarried first-time parents, how does perceived relationship quality*

change during the transition from childbirth to one year postpartum? Further, what

factors predict change in perceived relationship quality as measured at birth and again, one year postpartum?

Hypothesis 1: Across the transition to parenthood (Wave 1 to Wave 2) among unmarried first-time parents, perceived relationship quality is expected to decrease.

Hypothesis 2: Across the transition to parenthood (Wave 1 to Wave 2) among unmarried first-time parents, being a mother, young age at childbirth, less education, short relationship duration, not cohabiting, and poor health are expected to predict greater declines in perceived relationship quality.

Hypothesis 3: Across the transition to parenthood (Wave 1 to Wave 2) among unmarried first-time parents, attendance at religious services, higher estimation of the likelihood (chance) of marriage, being in a steady relationship, fathers' presence at childbirth, fathers' provision of money, fathers' provision of transportation support, and joint activities with one's partner are expected to predict less decline in perceived relationship quality.

Hypothesis 4: Gender is expected to moderate the links between predictor variables and change in perceived relationship quality among unmarried first-time parents.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Dataset

The sample used in this study was drawn from Waves 1 and 2 of the FFCW Study (see Reichman et al., 2001). The FFCW Study utilized a nationally representative stratified random sample (when weights are applied) of 4,898 birthing parents in 20 urban centers with populations over 200,000. Mothers were typically interviewed either at the hospital following childbirth or shortly thereafter in their homes. Fathers were most frequently interviewed at home. Designed to follow the longitudinal trajectories of 3,696 unmarried and 1,185 married mothers (17 mothers were missing data on marital status), the baby's father, and the focal child at birth (Wave 1) and at 1, 3, and 5 years postpartum, the FFCW Study focused primarily on the understudied areas of nonmarital childbearing, the impact of welfare reform, and the role of fathers in the transition to parenthood.

Sample Construction and Missing Data

A subpopulation of the larger FFCW Study dataset was purposefully selected because of my research interest as a family life educator in considering changes in perceived relationship quality for unmarried couples experiencing the birth of a first child for *both* partners. The sample used here consists of mothers and fathers interviewed at Wave 1 (baseline) who at childbirth had no prior biological children, were unmarried to

the other parent, were interviewed at Wave 2, were asked the four items comprising the dependent variable at Wave 2, and had complete data available for selecting cases to be included. Because the items comprising the dependent variable related to the quality of couple relationships, the FFCW Study survey gathered responses to these four items only from mothers and fathers that were in romantic relationships with each other at Wave 1 or were currently in a romantic relationship with each other at Wave 2. Therefore, mothers and fathers not in a romantic relationship at Wave 1 or Wave 2 were excluded from inclusion in the sample due to an intentional skip pattern within the FFCW Study survey.

The sample of mothers included in this study came about through a series of case selections. First, of the 4,898 mothers interviewed at baseline (Wave 1), 1,869 were selected because they had no other biological children. Second, the study sample was reduced to 1,446 mothers who were unmarried at Wave 1. Third, the study sample was reduced to 1,295 mothers who were interviewed at Wave 2. Of those mothers who did not participate in Wave 2, most were due to nonresponse. Fourth, the final sample of 990 mothers was constructed to include only those mothers who were administered the dependent variable at Wave 2. The final selection excluded 305 mothers not in a romantic relationship with their baby's father at Wave 1 or currently in a romantic relationship with their baby's father at Wave 2 (recall that these mothers were not administered the four items comprising the scales). Of the 4,898 mothers interviewed at Wave 1, 20.21% were included in the current study sample.

The sample of fathers included in this study came about through a similar series of intentional case selections. First, of the 3,830 fathers interviewed at baseline (Wave 1), 1,604 were included because they had no other biological children. Second, the study sample was reduced to 1,218 fathers who were unmarried at Wave 1. Third, the study sample was reduced to 969 fathers who were interviewed at Wave 2. Fourth, the final sample of 885 fathers was constructed to include only those fathers who were administered the dependent variable at Wave 2. The final selection excluded 84 fathers not in a romantic relationship with their baby's mother at Wave 1 or currently in a romantic relationship with their baby's mother at Wave 2 (recall that these fathers were not administered the four items comprising the scales). Of the 3,830 fathers interviewed at Wave 1, 23.10% were included in the current study sample.

The study sample of 1885 data records consisted of 492 dyads and 508 mothers and 393 fathers without data from their partners. The lack of partner data for many of the mothers and fathers was due to the selection criteria and skip pattern previously discussed. For example, for 193 of the 990 mothers and 16 of the 885 fathers included in this study, the other parent was not interviewed at Wave 2. In addition, some partners were not administered the outcome variable because they had indicated a lack of a romantic relationship at Wave 1 or a current romantic relationship at Wave 2.

The potential limitation of missing data on the generalizability of study results is a genuine concern (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). As recommended by Acock (2005), the selection out of mothers and fathers based upon prior offspring or marriage is not problematic because those cases did not fit the study's definition of the sample. As part of

the selection process I excluded cases missing data directly pertaining to the selection criteria. For example, 16 mothers were excluded because there was no indication whether they had other biological children. Lacking information regarding whether particular mothers or fathers had other biological children, it would have been difficult to make a strong empirical argument for including such cases. The availability of valid data on the dependent variable at Wave 2 (having been administered the items) was also set as selection criteria. In determining the best course of action to address cases with missing waves, I referenced the practice of others utilizing the FFCW Study dataset. Excluding cases because of missing waves was utilized in no less than 10 articles published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* (*JMF*) between 2007 and 2009 (Bzostek, 2008; Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Gibson-Davis, 2009; Gibson-Davis & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Guzzo, 2009; Kimbro, 2008; Osborne et al., 2007; Mikelson, 2008; Ryan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2008; Teitler & Reichman, 2008).

The sample used here differs from the larger FFCW Study sample as a result of case selection decisions. There was no statistically significant difference in percentage of mothers by race between the study sample and the larger FFCW Study sample, $\chi^2(1, N = 4898) = 0.37$, $p = .54$. There was no statistically significant difference in percentage of mothers by education between the study sample and the larger FFCW Study sample, $\chi^2(2, N = 4887) = 4.17$, $p = .12$. There was a statistically significant difference in age between mothers in the sample ($M = 21.49$, $SD = 4.44$) as compared with those in the larger dataset ($M = 26.24$, $SD = 6.03$); $t(4893) = 27.73$, $p < .001$. For fathers, there was no statistically significant difference in percentage of fathers by race between the study

sample and the larger FFCW Study sample; $\chi^2(1, N = 3783) = .69, p = .44$. A statistically

significant difference was found in education for fathers, $\chi^2(2, N = 3808) = 27.94, p =$

.001. Fathers in the sample were more likely to have less formal education than fathers in

the larger FFCW Study. Fathers in the sample were younger ($M = 23.80, SD = 5.45$) than

fathers in the larger study ($M = 29.19, SD = 7.29$); $t(3828)=23.71, p <.001$. In summary,

mothers and fathers in the sample tended to be younger than those in the larger FFCW

Study sample and fathers tended to be less educated. It also highlights a particularly

fragile sample drawn from the larger FFCW Study dataset.

To address the concern over missing data, SPSS's missing value analysis (MVA)

was performed. Little's MCAR test resulted in a $\chi^2(667, N = 1875) = 1643.75, p < .001$,

indicating that the data were not missing completely at random but rather missing within

some pattern in the data. Because the data were not MCAR and less than 1% of the data

were missing, I followed an approach similar to Amato, Johnson, Booth, and Rogers

(2003) and imputed data using expectation maximization algorithm (Allison, 2009) that is

contained in the MVA module of SPSS 17. A comparison of measures of central

tendency for study variables confirms that little change occurred with EM imputation up

to the 1000th decimal point.

Sample Characteristics

Drawing from a secondary dataset of fragile families, the study sample consists of

980 mothers and 885 fathers who were primarily young, less educated, and minority, and

who shared at least some degree of romantic relationship either at Wave1 or Wave 2.

Mothers ranged in ages from 14 to 50, with 39.3% in their teenage years, 54.4% between

the ages of 20 and 30, 5.7% in their thirties, and 0.6% older than 40. Fathers ranged in ages from 16 to 50, with 19.9% in their teenage years, 65.3% in their twenties, 13.1% in their thirties, and 1.7% older than 40. Approximately one-third of mothers lacked a high school diploma or GED, 31.3% were high school graduates, 28.1% had completed some college or trade school, 3.5% held undergraduate degrees, and 0.6% had graduate degrees. For fathers, 38.4% had not completed high school, 34.5% were high school graduates, 22.3% had completed some college or trade school, 3.4% held undergraduate degrees, and 1.4% had graduate degrees. Mothers self-reported their race as Black (47.9%), White (28.9%), American Indian (4.6%), Asian (2.1%), or Other (16.5%). Fathers self-reported their race as Black (47.8%), White (28.2%), American Indian (4.6%), Asian (2.0%), or Other (15.5%). The race of 1.9% of fathers was not indicated. In terms of ethnicity, 28% of mothers and 30% of fathers reported being Hispanic (of any race).

At Wave 1, nearly all mothers (96.8%) and fathers (98.2%) reported being romantically involved. One year later (Wave 2), 72% of mothers and 79% of fathers reported being in romantic relationships with each other. Of those mothers in romantic relationships with their baby's father at Wave 1, 11% married between Waves 1 and 2 and 29% reported no longer being in a romantic relationship. For fathers, 62% reported remaining in a romantic relationship with their baby's mother between Waves 1 and 2. Slightly over 3% of couples not in any type of romantic relationship at Wave 1 either married or became romantically involved in the year following childbirth.

Although measuring the degree of coparenting among these couples was beyond the scope of this study, it does appear that the majority of the sample had at least monthly contact with their baby. At Wave 2, 98.4% of mothers reported that fathers had contact with their child. At the same Wave, 92.4% of fathers reported that mothers had contact with their child.

Measurement of Variables

Data were gathered separately at each Wave for mothers and fathers in the FFCW Study. In this study, responses from all eligible mothers and fathers meeting the selection criteria were included as separate cases in the same analysis. As a test of distinguishability of dyadic members (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), mothers' and fathers' composite scores on perceived relationship quality were correlated for Wave 1 and then for Wave 2 using a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Perceived relationship quality scores for mothers and fathers were statistically significant at Wave 1, $r(489) = .26$, $p < .01$ and at Wave 2, $r(489) = .27$ $p < .01$. Using the general guide for interpreting correlations as a measure of nonindependence of dyadic data provided by Kenny et al., it is appropriate to include both mothers and fathers in the same analysis because of the resulting small to medium correlations (Cohen, 1988). Also as previously indicated, single imputation was used for the less than 1% of missing data.

Outcome Variable - Change in Perceived Relationship Quality Across the Transition to Parenthood

Studies drawn from the FFCW Study dataset have operationalized relationship quality in various ways. Gibson-Davis and Brooks-Gunn, in a 2007 *JMF* article,

employed a four-item scale to assess emotional supportiveness as a component of relationship quality. Osborne et al. in a later 2007 *JMF* article, included four aspects of relationship quality: emotional supportiveness, couple disagreement, domestic violence, and substance abuse. Teitler and Reichman in a 2008 *JMF* publication, operationalized relationship quality to include relationship status (was mother cohabiting at time of pregnancy), the presence of other children in the home by other fathers, how long the partners knew each other before the pregnancy, and the number of partners the mother had before the pregnancy. As a final example, Gee et al. (2007) operationalized relationship quality among fragile families as consisting of a measure of social engagement (participating in joint activities) and frequency of disagreements.

I operationalized perceived relationship quality using the four item scale employed by Gibson-Davis (2009): "How often is the baby's father/mother fair and willing to compromise?" "How often did the baby's father/mother express affection or love to you?" "How often did the baby's father/mother encourage you do things that were important to you?" and "How often did the baby's father/mother criticize you or your ideas?" Gibson-Davis conceptualized this scale as representing a "parental supportiveness module" (p. 151); alternatively, this scale might also be viewed as a measure of emotional support that each parent perceives to receive from the other parent. In this study it is the individual parents' perceptions of emotional support being received from the other parent that is being measured rather than a measure of actual support.

Responses were reverse coded for "fairness/compromise," "affection/love," and "encouraged" so that a higher score indicated higher perceived relationship quality: 1 =

never, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*. Responses for the "criticize you" item were coded so that

a higher score indicated higher perceived relationship quality: 1 = *often*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3

= *never*. For mothers, the composite measure of perceived relationship quality at Wave 1

had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.61 and all measure items were significantly correlated

between $r(972) = .10$, p < .01 and $r(972) = .41$, p < .01. At Wave 2, the composite

measure had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.72 and items were all significantly correlated

between $r(977) = .08$, p < .01 and $r(977) = .54$, p < .01. For fathers, the composite

measure of perceived relationship quality at Wave 1 had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.54 and

all measure items were significantly correlated between $r(873) = .17$, p < .01 and $r(873)$

= .35, p < .01. At Wave 2, the composite measure had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.63 and all

measure items were significantly correlated between $r(863) = .18$, p < .01 and $r(863) =$

.44, p < .01. Similar alpha scores have been reported for measures of relationship quality

using these data (e.g., $\alpha = .50$ to .69, Gibson-Davis & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; $\alpha = .55$,

Carlson & McLanahan, 2006; $\alpha = .69$, Osborne et al., 2007). The outcome variable of

this study – change in perceived relationship quality between childbirth and one year

postpartum – was computed by subtracting the composite score of perceived relationship

quality at Wave 2 from the composite score of perceived relationship quality at Wave 1

(Johnson, 2005). Thus, positive change scores are indicative of increases in perceived

relationship quality, negative change scores are indicative of declines in perceived

relationship quality, and zero (0) change scores are indicative of no change in perceived

relationship quality across this transition. The resulting change score values were used in

the regression analyses.

Predictor Variables

Gender. Gender was assessed as a dichotomous variable, with *mothers* = 0 and *fathers* = 1.

Age at childbirth. Age at childbirth was assessed as a continuous variable.

Religious attendance. Religious attendance was assessed with a single item: "About how often do you attend religious services?" The original five response categories were collapsed into four categories and were reverse coded to yield: 1 = *never*, 2 = *hardly ever*, 3 = *several times per year*, 4 = *frequently (> 3 times per month)*.

Chance of marriage. The perceived chance of marrying one's reproductive partner was assessed using a single item: "What are the chances that you will marry the baby's father/mother in the future?" The original five response categories were collapsed into three categories: 1 = *50/50 or less*, 2 = *good*, 3 = *certain*.

Education. The original nine response categories for education were collapsed into three categories: 1 = *< high school diploma or GED*, 2 = *high school education or diploma*, 3 = *> high school education or GED*.

Relationship duration. The duration of the relationship prior to pregnancy was assessed by combining two items: "How many years did you know the baby's father before you got pregnant?" and "How many months did you know the baby's father before you got pregnant?" For example, indicating that the relationship began 2 years and six months in the past would be computed as existing for 30 months prior to pregnancy (2 years = 24 months + 6 months = a combined 30 months).The resulting value represented

the total number of months that the couple were in any type of relationship prior to the pregnancy.

Cohabitation. Cohabitation was assessed with a single item that was slightly different for mothers and fathers: "Is mother living with father at baseline? " or "Are you and baby's mother living together now?" Responses were coded: 0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*.

Relationship status. The current relationship was assessed with a single item: "What describes your current relationship with baby's mother/father?" The original five response categories were collapsed into two categories: 0 = *steady* and 1 = *not steady*.

Health. Overall health was assessed with a single item: "How is your health?" Responses were reverse coded to yield: 1 = *poor*, 2 = *fair*, 3 = *good*, 4 = *very good*, 5 = *great*.

Father involvement. Three items were included as separate variables to assess the involvement of fathers with their baby's mother during pregnancy and at childbirth. One, parents were asked if the baby's father visited the mother in the hospital. Two, "During pregnancy did baby's father/you give money to buy things for the baby?" Three, "Did baby's father/you help in other ways, like providing transportation/doing chores?" Responses were reverse coded so that 0 = *no* and 1 = *yes*.

Activities with partner. Three dichotomous items (*yes/no*) were summed to create a measure of joint activities together: had the mother and father visited friends, did they go out to a movie/sporting event, or eat out at a restaurant. [As with all study variables, this variable was entered separately into the dataset for mothers and fathers.] Original response options were reverse coded so that a higher summed score indicated

more activities together. The composite measure had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.68 for mothers and items were significantly correlated between $r(972) = .36$, p < .01 and $r(972) = .46$, p < .01. The composite measure had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.55 for fathers and items were significantly correlated between $r(873) = .22$, p < .01 and $r(873) = .40$, p < .01.

Analytic Strategy

As noted previously, the sample used in this study was composed of unmarried parents interviewed at childbirth (Wave 1) and then one year later (Wave 2). In order to test for gender as a main effect and to test for gender as a moderator of the relationships between the predictor variables and change in perceived relationship quality, data gathered from mothers and fathers were entered into the same dataset for use in analyses. Comparisons between mothers and fathers are a useful tool in interpreting the results in light of family life education intervention programs and clinical practice.

Preliminary analysis began with calculation of frequencies and descriptive statistics for study variables. For dichotomous and categorical variables, the frequencies and percent of responses were computed. For other descriptive statistics, the mean, standard deviation, median, and range were computed. Second, change scores for the dependent variable were calculated. Change scores are an appropriate statistical method for studying the effects of transitions using two-wave panel data (Johnson, 2005). In this study, the change scores represented the difference between the measurement of perceived relationship quality for parents at the birth of a first child for either of them (Wave 1) and then one year later (Wave 2). Third, bivariate correlations were computed

between independent variables and the dependent variable. Fourth, in a series of regression analyses, the contributions made by a number of predictor variables linked in the literature with relationship quality were examined. In Block 1, all predictors were entered into the regression analysis. In Block 2, the interactions between gender and the predictor variables were entered into the regression. To reduce multicollinearity, the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991) were followed and continuous variables were centered when creating interaction terms. Interpretation of significant interaction terms were performed following the guidance offered by Aiken and West.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Results are presented in three parts. First, in preliminary analyses, descriptive statistics are reported for predictor variables. Frequencies and percents are shown for dichotomous and categorical variables. Means, standard deviations, median scores, and ranges are shown for continuous variables (or those treated as continuous). Bivariate correlations are reported for study variables including the outcome variable. Second, to address the hypothesized decrease in perceived relationship quality expected from childbirth (Wave 1) to one year postpartum (Wave 2), change scores are presented. Third, results of regression analyses are reported to address the hypothesized links between the predictor variables and change in perceived relationship quality and their interaction with gender in predicting changes in perceived relationship quality.

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1 for dichotomous and categorical predictor variables used in this study. As shown, the sample was fairly evenly divided between mothers (52.8%) and fathers (47.2%). At Wave 1, over two-thirds (70.8%) of parents did not frequently attend religious services. The vast majority (74.8%) believed that the likelihood of marriage to the child's other parent was either good or certain, well over half (59.1%) were cohabiting with their baby's other parent, and almost all (86.6%)

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were in steady relationships with their baby's other parent at the time of childbirth. Fathers were frequently involved, with nearly nine of ten parents reporting that fathers were present at childbirth (86.1%). Almost all fathers provided monetary (93.6%) and transportation support (90.5%) to the baby's mother during pregnancy.

Descriptive statistics for continuous predictor variables are presented in Table 2. At Wave 1, two-thirds of parents (67.3%) reported relationship durations of more than a year at the beginning of pregnancy. Parents also reported being in very good (36.6%) or great health (34.8%) and 80.5% participated in at least two types of joint activities (e.g., visiting friends, going to the movies, eating out together at a restaurant) with their baby's other parent.

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed for each predictor variable and for the outcome variable of change in perceived relationship quality (see Table 3). Correlations can be interpreted using Cohen's (1988) general guide, with coefficients +/- .0 to .3 indicating weak relationships between variables, +/- .3 to .5 indicating a moderate relationship, and coefficients greater than +/- .5 indicating a strong relationship. In addition, chi-square or independent sample t-tests were calculated for statistically significant correlations of predictor variables with gender.

At the bivariate level, there were weak associations between change in perceived relationship quality and a number of the predictor variables. Being a father ($r(1873) = .05, p < .05$), cohabiting ($r(1873) = .06, p < .05$), and not being in a steady relationship prior to the child's birth ($r(1873) = .12, p < .01$) were associated with less decline in perceived relationship quality. Greater declines in perceived relationship quality were

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associated with greater endorsement at childbirth (Wave 1) that marriage was likely ($r(1873) = -.10$, $p < .01$), fathers' provision of money ($r(1873) = -.08$, $p < .01$), and fathers' provision of transportation support ($r(1873) = -.11$, $p < .01$).

There were a number of significant associations between gender and other predictor variables suggesting that mothers and fathers may differ from one another in important ways. Gender was associated with age at childbirth ($r(1873) = .23$, $p < .01$), with mothers ($M = 21.50$, $SD = 4.4$) younger than fathers ($M = 23.80$, $SD = 5.5$); $t(1873) = 10.11$, $p < .01$. Gender was associated with attendance at religious services ($r(1873) = -.10$, $p < .01$), with mothers more likely then fathers to attend religious services, $\chi^2(3, 1875) = 23.61$, $p < .01$. Thirty-four (34) percent of mothers as compared to 24% of fathers reported frequent attendance at religious services. Gender was associated with chance of marriage ($r(1873) = .13$, $p < .01$), with fathers more likely than mothers to believe that there was a certain chance of marriage, $\chi^2(2, 1875) = 32.92$, $p < .01$. Approximately 54% of fathers as compared to 43% of mothers believed that marriage to the child's other parent was certain. Gender was associated with cohabitation ($r(1873) = -.10$, $p < .01$), with fathers less likely than mothers to report cohabiting, $\chi^2(1, 1875) = 16.80$, $p < .01$. Thirty-six (36) percent of fathers as compared to 45% of mothers reported being in a cohabiting relationship. Gender was associated with relationship status ($r(1873) = -.06$, $p < .01$), with fathers more likely than mothers to report being in a steady relationship, $\chi^2(1, 1875) = 7.76$, $p < .01$. Eighty-nine (89) percent of fathers as compared to 85% of mothers reported being in a steady relationship. Gender was associated with fathers' presence at childbirth ($r(1873) = -.07$, $p < .01$), with mothers more likely than

fathers to report the baby's father was present at childbirth, $\chi^2(1, 1875) = 8.50$, $p < .01$.

Eighty-eight (88) percent of mothers as compared to 84% of fathers reported that the

father was present at childbirth. Gender was associated with fathers' provision of

monetary support ($r(1873) = .07$, $p < .01$), with fathers more likely than mothers to report

they provided money to their baby's mother during pregnancy, $\chi^2(1, 1875) = 9.90$, $p <$

.01. Ninety-six (96) percent of fathers as compared to 92% of mothers reported that the

baby's father provided money during pregnancy. Gender was associated with fathers'

provision of transportation support ($r(1873) = .09$, $p < .01$), with fathers more likely than

mothers to report that they provided transportation support for mothers, $\chi^2(1, 1875) =$

15.59, $p < .01$. Ninety-three (93) percent of fathers as compared to 88% of mothers

reported that the baby's father provided transportation support during pregnancy.

In addition, moderate correlations are noted for associations between relationship

type variables such as chance of marriage, cohabitation, relationship status, fathers'

presence at childbirth, and support provided by fathers at or before childbirth (Wave 1).

For example, reporting a higher likelihood of marriage was associated with cohabiting

($r(1873) = -.36$, $p < .01$), being in a steady relationship ($r(1873) = -.45$, $p < .01$), and

fathers' provision of transportation support ($r(1873) = .30$, $p < .01$). Being in a steady

relationship was associated with cohabitation ($r(1873) = .37$, $p < .01$), fathers' provision

of monetary support ($r(1873) = -.31$, $p < .01$), and fathers' provision of transportation

support ($r(1873) = -.38$, $p < .01$). Fathers' presence at childbirth was associated with

fathers' provision of monetary support ($r(1873) = .30$, $p < .01$), fathers' provision of

transportation support ($r(1873) = .37$, $p < .01$), and engaging in joint activities with one's

parenting partner (r(1873) = .31, $p < .01$). Fathers' provision of transportation support was associated with fathers' provision of monetary support (r(1873) = .47, $p < .01$), and engaging in joint activities with one's parenting partner (r(1873) = .32, $p < .01$).

Change in Perceived Relationship Quality from Childbirth to One Year Postpartum

The first research question addressed was: Among unmarried first-time parents, how does perceived relationship quality change during the transition from childbirth to one year postpartum? It was hypothesized that unmarried first-time parents would experience decreases in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood (Wave1 to Wave 2). For the full sample, the measure of perceived relationship quality at childbirth (Wave 1) was moderately correlated with the same measure one year later (Wave 2), r(1873) = .31, $p < .01$. A paired samples t-test indicated a significant decline in perceived relationship quality between Wave 1 and Wave 2, t(1874) = 16.47, $p < .001$, providing support for the hypothesis. Perceived relationship quality decreased from a *Mean* of 2.68 (*SD* = .34) at Wave 1 to a *Mean* of 2.49 (*SD* = .47) at Wave 2, with a *Mean* difference score of -.18 (*SD* = .48, 95% CI [-.2061, -.1622]). To further describe the change in perceived relationship quality over the transition to parenthood, I calculated the frequencies and percents of parents increasing, decreasing, and having no change in perceived relationship quality (see Table 4). The breakdown of change in perceived relationship quality is also provided for mothers and fathers separately. Almost exactly half (49.8%) of parents decreased in perceived relationship quality across the initial year of the transition to parenthood. For 27.9% of parents perceived relationship quality did not change and 22.3% of parents increased in perceived relationship quality from Wave 1

to Wave 2. Of those parents scoring a 3 at Wave 1 (indication of high perceived

relationship quality), 13.8% remained at a 3 at Wave 2. Of those parents scoring a 1 or 2

on the perceived relationship quality measure at Wave 1, 35.0% increased their score by

Wave 2. As can be seen in Figure 1, perceived relationship quality decreased overall from

Wave 1 to Wave 2 for parents.

For mothers, the measure of perceived relationship quality at childbirth (Wave 1)

was moderately correlated with the same measure one year later (Wave 2), $r(988) = .32$, p

$< .01$. Perceived relationship quality for mothers at Wave 1 decreased from a *Mean* of

2.69 (*SD* = .34) to a *Mean* of 2.48 (*SD* = .49) at Wave 2, with a *Mean* difference score of

-.21 (*SD* = .50, 95% CI [-.2286, -.1762]). A paired samples *t*-test indicated a significant

decline in perceived relationship quality for mothers between Wave 1 and Wave 2, $t(989)$

$= 13.04$, $p < .001$. For 20.3% of mothers, perceived relationship quality increased and for

51.0% of mothers perceived relationship quality decreased.

For fathers, the measure of perceived relationship quality at childbirth (Wave 1)

was moderately correlated with the same measure one year later (Wave 2), $r(883) = .32$, p

$< .01$. For fathers, perceived relationship quality at Wave 1 decreased from a *Mean* of

2.66 (*SD* = .35) to a *Mean* of 2.50 (*SD* = .44) at Wave 2, with a *Mean* difference score of

-.16 (*SD* = .46, 95% CI [-.1888, -.1275]). A paired samples *t*-test indicated a significant

decline in perceived relationship quality for fathers between Wave 1 and Wave 2, $t(884)$

$= 10.13$, $p < .001$. For 24.6% of fathers, perceived relationship quality increased and for

48.8% of fathers perceived relationship quality decreased.

Predicting Change in Perceived Relationship Quality

The second research question posed was: What factors predict the change in perceived relationship quality as measured at birth and again, one year postpartum? To address this research question, it was hypothesized that at Wave 1 being a mother, young age at pregnancy, less education, short relationship duration, noncohabition, and poor health would predict greater declines in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood (Wave1 to Wave 2). As shown in the results of the regression analysis (see Table 5), no support was found for the hypothesis that young age at childbirth, education, relationship duration, noncohabation, or health predicted changes in perceived relationship quality. Gender was significant, however, with mothers experiencing greater declines in perceived relationship quality. As shown in Figure 2, fathers experienced significantly less decline in perceived relationship quality as compared with mothers, *unstandardized B* = .08, *β* =.08, p < .01.

To further address my research question regarding the prediction of changes in perceived relationship quality, I hypothesized that at Wave 1, attendance at religious services, greater endorsement at childbirth that marriage to the child's other parent was likely, being in a steady relationship, fathers' presence at childbirth, fathers' provision of monetary support, fathers' provision of transportation support, and joint activities with one's partner would predict less decline in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood (Wave1 to Wave 2). Partial support was found for this hypothesis. As can be seen in Table 5, a significant but very small percentage of the variance was explained in Block 1, R^2 = .03. After accounting for the variance explained

by the combination of predictor variables, the main effects of gender, chance of marriage, relationship status, fathers' presence at childbirth, and fathers' transportation support significantly contributed to prediction of change in perceived relationship quality. As shown in Figure 3, parents in steady relationships at childbirth (Wave 1) had significantly greater declines in perceived relationship quality than parents not in steady relationships, *unstandardized B* = .12, β = .08, p < .01. As shown in Figure 4, parents who had reported fathers' provision of transportation support at childbirth had significantly greater declines in perceived relationship quality as compared with parents who reported no transportation support, *unstandardized B* = -.14, β = -.08, p < .01. As shown in Figure 5, parents who reported that fathers were present at childbirth had significantly less decline in perceived relationship quality than parents who reported that fathers were not present at childbirth, *unstandardized B* = .08, β = .06, p < .05. As shown in Figure 6, chance of marriage was significantly predictive of change in perceived relationship quality, *unstandardized B* = -.03, β = -.05, p < .05. A follow-up ANCOVA analysis with Least Significant Difference pairwise comparison indicated that parents who reported a 50/50 or less chance of marriage had significantly less decline in perceived relationship quality than parents reporting a good or certain chance of marriage, $F(2, 1860)$ = 4.20, p < .05.

Gender as a Moderator of the Link between Predictor Variables

and Change in Perceived Relationship Quality

It was further hypothesized that gender would moderate the link between the predictor variables and change in perceived relationship quality. With the addition of all possible interactions with gender in Block 2, a significant but very small percentage of

the variance was explained by the addition of gender X predictor variable interaction terms, $\Delta R^2 = .01$. Gender X education (*unstandardized B = -.11, β = -.25, p < .01*) and gender X fathers' provision of transportation support (*unstandardized B = .24, β = .25, p < .05*) were linked with change in perceived relationship quality beyond that explained by the other predictor variables and interactions. Separate regressions were run for mothers and fathers to further probe the interactions. The link between education and change in perceived relationship quality was not significant for mothers (*unstandardized B = .04, β = .06, p = .09*) but was significant for fathers (*unstandardized B = -.07, β = -.13, p < .01*). For fathers, having less education was associated with less decrease in perceived relationship quality (see Figure 7). The link between fathers' provision of transportation support and change in perceived relationship quality was significant for mothers (*unstandardized B = -.23, β = -.15, p < .01*) but was not significant for fathers (*unstandardized B = .01, β = .01, p = .83*). For mothers, fathers' provision of transportation support at childbirth (Wave 1) was associated with greater declines in perceived relationship quality (see Figure 8). Again just for mothers, fathers not providing transportation support was associated with slight increases in perceived relationship quality.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Dichotomous and Categorical Variables (N = 1875)

Variables	*N*	*%*
Gender		
Mothers	990	52.8
Fathers	885	47.2
Religious Attendance		
Never	327	17.4
Hardly ever	572	30.5
Several times per year	429	22.9
Several times per month	547	29.2
Chance of marriage		
50/50 or less	474	25.3
Good	496	26.4
Certain	905	48.3
Education		
<HS diploma	698	37.2
HS diploma/GED	619	33.0
>HS diploma/GED	558	29.8
Cohabitation		
Yes	1109	59.1
No	766	40.9
Relationship Status		
Steady	1624	86.6
Not steady	251	13.4
Father present at childbirth		
Yes	1614	86.1
No	261	13.9
Father monetary support		
Yes	1755	93.6
No	120	6.4
Father transportation support		
Yes	1697	90.5
No	178	9.5

Note: All predictor variables were measured at childbirth or shortly thereafter (Wave 1)

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Study Continuous Variables (N = 1875)

Variables	*M*	*SD*	*Mdn*	Range
Age at childbirth	22.58	5.07	21	14 – 50
Relationship duration (months)	36.16	39.97	24.00	0 – 372
Health	4.00	.91	4.00	1 – 5
Activities with partner	5.27	.96	6.00	1 – 6

Note: All predictor variables were measured at childbirth or shortly thereafter (Wave 1).

Table 3

Bivariate Correlations Between Study Predictor Variables and Outcome Variable (N = 1875)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	–									
2. Age at childbirth	.23**	–								
3. Religious attendance	-.10**	.03	–							
4. Chance of marriage	.13**	.09**	.02	–						
5. Education	-.04	.29**	.10**	.16**	–					
6. Relationship duration	.01	.18**	.06*	.03	.05*	–				
7. Cohabitation	-.10**	-.17**	.09**	-.36**	-.06**	-.02	–			
8. Relationship status	-.06**	-.02	.01	-.45**	-.06*	-.06*	.37**	–		
9. Health	.02	.07**	.03	.03	.18**	.03	.00	-.03	–	
10. Father at childbirth	-.07**	-.02	-.04	.20**	.11**	.01	-.25**	-.28**	.01	–
11. Father monetary support	.07**	-.02	.03	.19**	.06**	.05*	-.20**	-.31**	.04	.30**
12. Father transportation support	.09**	.05*	-.05*	.30**	.07**	.05*	-.29**	-.38**	.05*	.37**
13. Activities with partner	.02	.01	-.00	.25**	.14**	.01	-.26**	-.26**	.08**	.31**
14. Change in RQ	.05*	.01	.03	-.10**	-.04	.02	.06*	.12**	-.03	-.02

Table 3

Continued

Variables	11	12	13	14
11. Father monetary support	–			
12. Father transportation support	.47**	–		
13. Activities with partner	.21**	.32**	–	
14. Change in RQ	-.08**	-.11**	-.04	–

Table 4

Change in Perceived Relationship Quality Scores for Unmarried Parents Across

Transition to First-time Parenthood (N = 1875)

	Mothers	*Fathers*	*Total for Both Parents*
Increase in Change Score	20.3%	24.6%	22.3%
Stable Change Score	28.9%	26.6%	27.9%
Decrease in Change Score	50.8%	48.8%	49.8%

Table 5

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Change in Perceived Relationship Quality (N = 1875)

Variable	Block 1			Block 2		
	B	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Gender	.08	.02	.08**	-.18	.27	-.18
Age at childbirth	.00	.00	.01	-.00	.00	-.05
Religious attendance	.02	.01	.04	.00	.01	-.01
Chance of marriage	-.03	.02	-.05*	-.02	.02	-.04
Education	-.02	.03	-.03	.04	.02	.06
Relationship duration	.00	.00	.03	.00	.00	.04
Cohabitation	-.00	.03	-.00	-.01	.04	-.01
Relationship status	.12	.04	.08**	.12	.05	.08*
Health	-.01	.01	-.02	-.01	.02	-.01
Father present at childbirth	.08	.04	.06*	.09	.06	.06
Father monetary support	-.06	.05	-.03	-.08	.07	-.04
Father transportation support	-.14	.05	-.08**	-.23	.06	-.14**
Activities with partner	.01	.01	.01	.00	.02	.01
Gender *X* Age at childbirth				.01	.001	.07

Gender *X* Religious attendance				.04	.02	.12
Gender *X* Chance of marriage				-.02	.03	-.06
Gender *X* Education				-.11	.03	-.25**
Gender *X* Relationship duration				.00	.00	-.01
Gender *X* Cohabitation				.01	.05	.01
Gender *X* Relationship status				.02	.08	.02
Gender *X* Health				-.01	.03	-.01
Gender *X* Father at childbirth				.00	.07	.00
Gender *X* Father monetary support				.11	.11	.12
Gender *X* Father transportation support				.24	.09	.25*
Gender *X* Activities with partner				.01	.03	.07
R^2	.03***			.05**		
ΔR^2				.01		
F for ΔR^2				2.34**		

Note: Age, relationship duration and health were centered at their means.

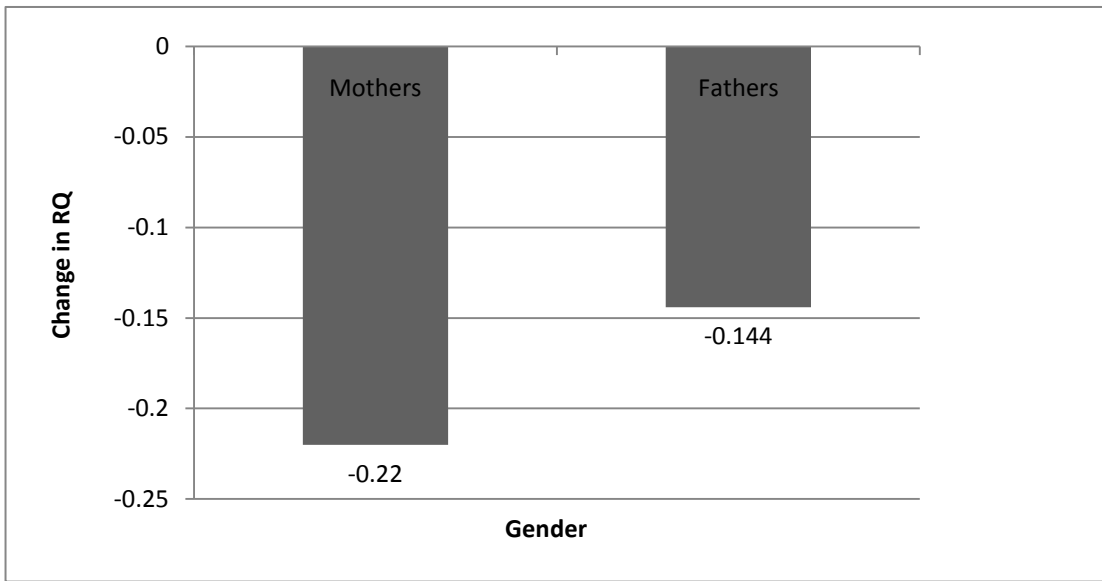*p* $<$ .05, **p* $<$ .01., ***p* $<$ .001

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Figure 1. Change in perceived relationship quality from Wave 1 to Wave 2 for unmarried
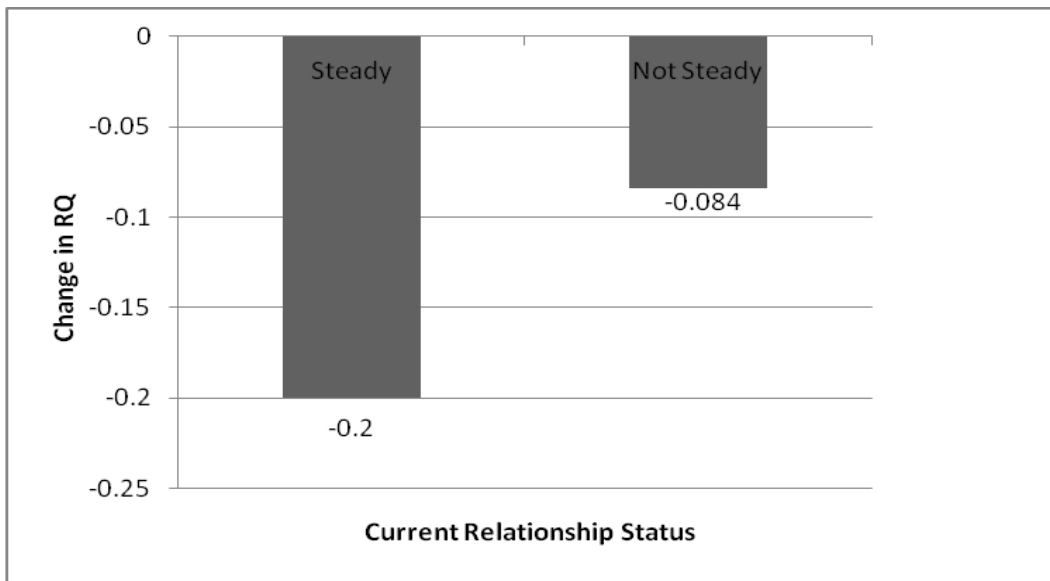
parents.

Change in Relationship Quality

Note: Perceived relationship quality ranged from 1 to 3, with a 3 indicating the highest
score

Figure 2. Decreases in perceived relationship quality across transition to first-time

unmarried parenthood.
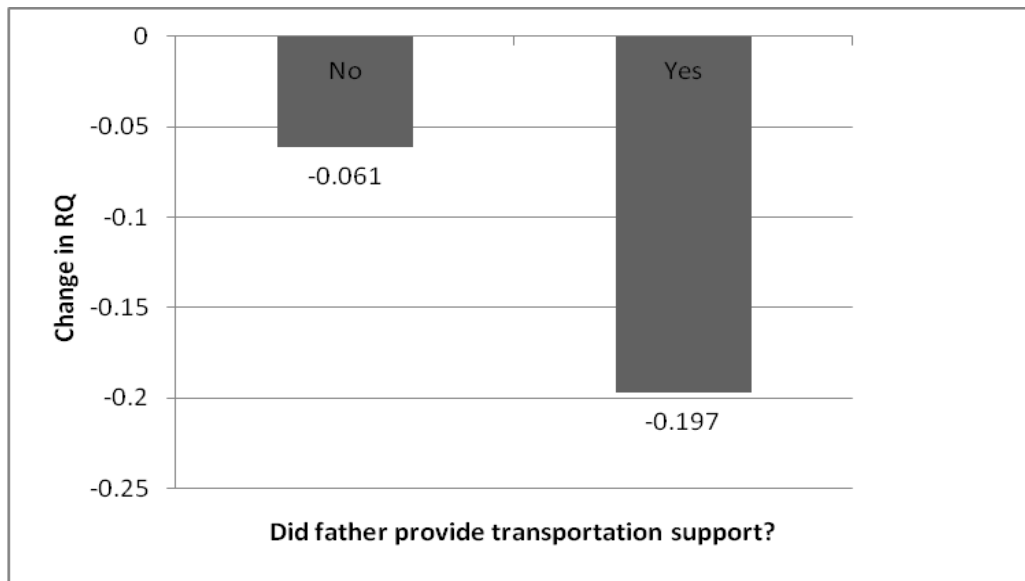

Note: A zero (0) score indicates no change in perceived relationship quality; a negative
score indicates a decline in relationship quality

Figure 3. Change in perceived relationship quality across transition to first-time

parenthood as predicted from current relationship.

Note: A zero (0) score indicates no change in perceived relationship quality; a negative
score indicates a decline in perceived relationship quality

Figure 4. Change in perceived relationship quality across transition to first-time parenthood as predicted from fathers' provision of transportation support.
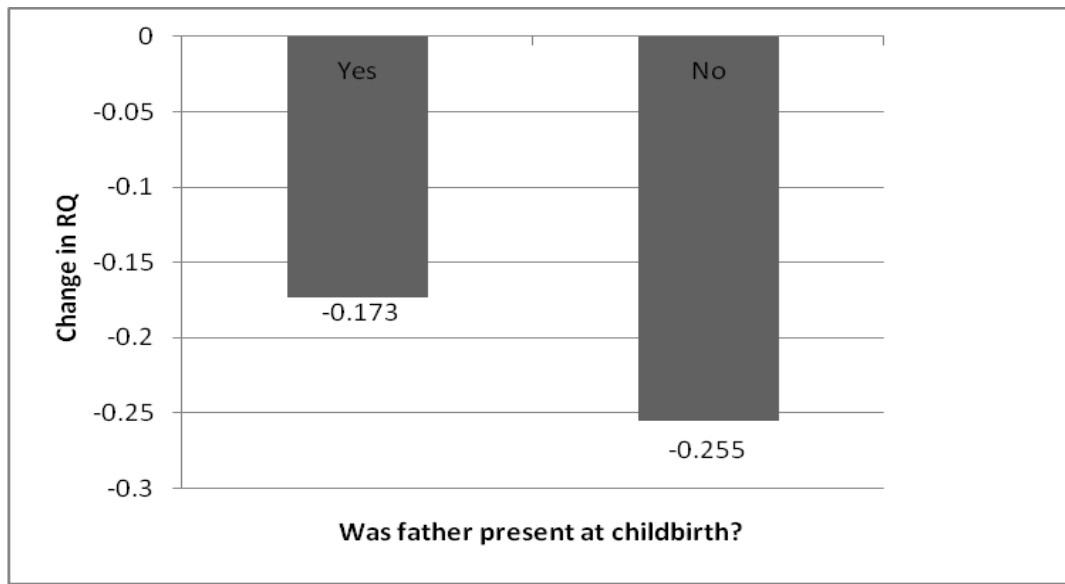

Note: A zero (0) score indicates no change in perceived relationship quality; a negative score indicates a decline in perceived relationship quality

Figure 5. Change in perceived relationship quality across transition to first-time parenthood as predicted from the fathers' presence at childbirth.

Note: A zero (0) score indicates no change in perceived relationship quality; a negative score indicates a decline in perceived relationship quality

Figure 6. Change in perceived relationship quality across transition to first-time parenthood as predicted from the estimated likelihood of marriage.
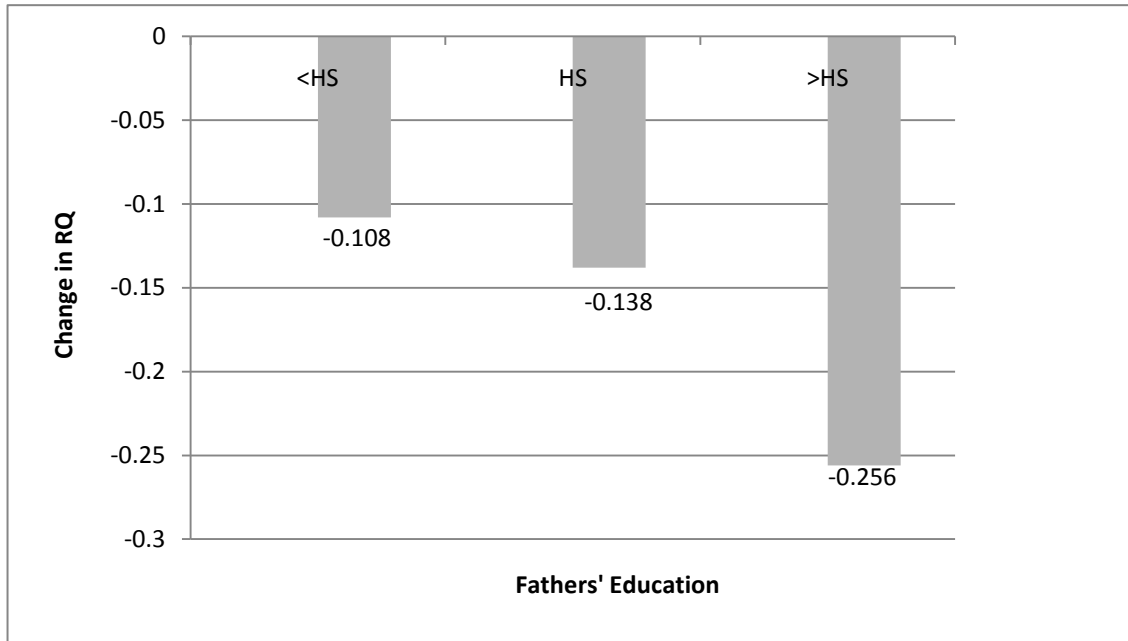

Note: A zero (0) score indicates no change in perceived relationship quality; a negative score indicates a decline in perceived relationship quality

Figure 7. Relationship between education and change in perceived relationship quality as moderated by gender (fathers only).

Note: A zero (0) score indicates no change in perceived relationship quality; a negative score indicates a decline in perceived relationship quality

Figure 8. The relationship between fathers' provision of transportation support and

change in perceived relationship quality as moderated by gender (mothers only).

Note: A zero (0) score indicates no change in perceived relationship quality; a negative
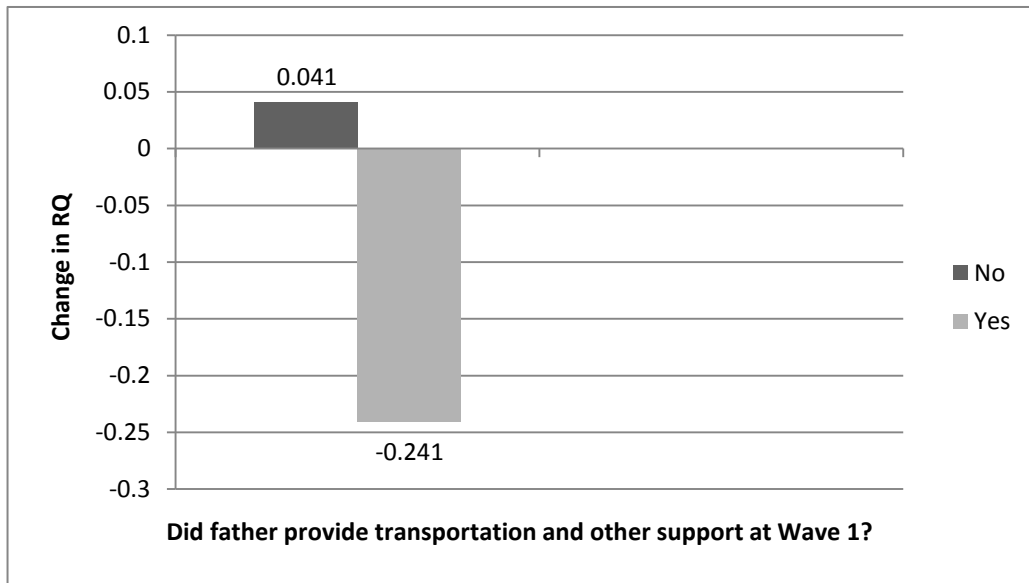score indicates a decline in perceived relationship quality

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Consistent findings over a number of decades indicate that the transition to parenthood is frequently associated with declines in relationship quality (e.g., Demo & Cox, 2001; Kluwer, 2010; LeMasters, 1957), and that this decline appears to persist at least over the first few years following the transition to parenthood (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Doss et al., 2009; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007). With ongoing replication of similar findings, the field of family studies may well be approaching a saturation point in regard to this literature, at least based on studies with samples of married couples. A new research focus is emerging to expand our attention to "diversity in pathways to parenthood" (Smock & Greenland, 2010). Including unmarried couples transitioning to parenthood is a critical enhancement of contemporary literature that better reflects the increases in the number of children born to unmarried parents in the past several decades. Drawing on 2006 and 2007 data, unmarried parents accounted for over a third of all births in the United States. In comparison, unmarried births accounted for just 18.4% of all births in 1980 (Ventura, 2009).

The present study adds to our understanding of the diversity of pathways to parenthood by considering how perceived relationship quality changes among a sample of unmarried parents transitioning to first-time parenthood. Two research questions

guided this study. One, I considered whether perceived relationship quality changed across this transition. That is, does perceived relationship quality generally increase or decrease from the time of childbirth (Wave 1) to one year postpartum (Wave 2) for unmarried parents? Two, I considered whether certain variables associated in the literature with relationship quality during this transition were predictive of change in perceived relationship quality among this sample of unmarried first-time parents. I proposed that a better understanding of predictors of change in perceived relationship quality could aid family life educators in developing parenting education programs for unmarried parents.

The body of this chapter is divided into five sections. First, the four study hypotheses are discussed in light of the results. Second, study strengths and limitations are considered. Third, suggestions for future research are offered. Fourth, because the ultimate purpose of this study was to enhance educational and programmatic intervention for healthy family living and positive outcomes among unmarried parents, recommendations are offered for family life educators and clinicians. Fifth, and finally, the chapter concludes with some final thoughts.

Expected Decline in Perceived Relationship Quality from Childbirth

to One Year Postpartum

Overall, support was found for the hypothesized decline in perceived relationship quality among unmarried first-time parents. Parents decreased slightly in a measure of perceived relationship quality from childbirth (Wave 1) to one year postpartum (Wave 2). Approximately half of mothers and fathers decreased in perceived relationship quality

while approximately another quarter neither increased nor decreased in perceived relationship quality. Slightly over one-fifth of mothers and nearly one-fourth of fathers actually increased in perceived relationship quality across this transition. Although perceived relationship quality did tend to decline, what is of note is the relatively high mean averages for perceived relationship quality both before (M =2.68, SD = .34) and after (M =2.49, SD = .47) the transition to parenthood. That is, on a scale from 1 to 3, with a 3 indicating high perceived relationship quality, parents on average reported that their baby's other parent somewhat to often was fair and willing to compromise, expressed affection or love, encouraged them to do things, and did not criticize their ideas. The decline in perceived relationship quality experienced by these unmarried parents appears to follow similar patterns reported for married mothers and fathers across the transition to parenthood (for a review, see Kluwer, 2010). Belsky and Rovine (1990), for example, found that 44% of married parents in their volunteer, convenience sample of 128 middle and working class couples experienced decline in relationship quality, 35% experienced no decline, while 21% experienced an increase in relationship quality across this transition. In a later study, Belsky and Kelly (1994) found that 51% of married couples declined in relationship quality, 30% of couples experienced no decline, and 19% of couples experienced an increase in relationship quality across this transition. Recall that in the current study, close to half of unmarried parents declined in perceived relationship quality, 28% experienced no change in perceived relationship quality, and 22% experienced an increase in perceived relationship quality.

Results also indicated that mothers had greater declines in perceived relationship quality than fathers. This finding, too, is consistent with other studies (e.g., Twenge et al., 2003). Greater declines in marital quality for mothers than fathers across the transition to parenthood have been explained in the literature primarily by the changing roles of mothers postpartum. Mothers typically are responsible for most of the household and childcare responsibilities and frequently make most of the career changing accommodations resulting from childbirth (Kluwer, 2010). Unfortunately within the available FFCW Study dataset, most of these variables were unavailable for analysis.

Predictors of Change in Perceived Relationship Quality

Across the Transition to Parenthood

Taken together, the predictors examined in this study explained little of the change in perceived relationship quality across the transition to parenthood for the unmarried parents in the sample. Although it was expected that the predictor variables would tap into vulnerabilities or protective factors that might accelerate or attenuate the decline in perceived relationship quality, few of the variables significantly predicted either greater or lesser declines in perceived relationship quality.

Three possible explanations may help explain why the model lacked strong predictive value. First, this was primarily an exploratory study so variables were selected to investigate typical predictors of perceived relationship quality among couples – but not specifically among unmarried couples transitioning to parenthood for the first-time. With an understudied sample, there was limited research providing strong guidance for selection of important variables. As additional studies are conducted with unmarried first-

time parents making this transition, better and more predictive variables will likely be identified. For example, being a young parent may have tremendous impact upon future union formation and stability, but it simply may not be particularly salient to the maintenance of perceived relationship quality within an unmarried relationship. Similarly, short relationship duration may not be as important in the event of pregnancy among unmarried parents. It may be that other variables such as stresses and enduring vulnerabilities (see the discussion below regarding the VSA model) are more critical in explaining changes in relationship quality. Second, the trade-off for accessing such a rich secondary dataset as the FFCW Study sometimes leads to the use of crude proxies for variables. For example, it is not surprising that the religiosity variable was not predictive since most studies have reported at best modest associations between religious attendance and relationship quality (Mahoney et al., 2001). The strongest associations between religiosity and relationship quality involve variables unavailable in this dataset - direct religious practice such as reading scriptural texts, prayer, and personal religiousness. As discussed previously, the outcome variable was variously operationalized by studies using this same dataset. This is likely due to the lack of a clearly defined measure of perceived relationship quality. It should be noted that a specific item assessing the quality of the couple relationship was not posed until Wave 2 of data collection. Third, my operationalization of some predictor variables may have been problematic. For example, the lack of support for the link between poor health and change in perceived relationship quality may have been due to the fact that the single item used was insufficient for accessing health ("How is your health?"). On the surface this may have been a healthy

sample with 6.9% of parents reporting poor or fair health, but a more carefully

constructed composite variable might have better measured a more complex construct of

health. For example, a "healthful living" measure incorporating several items (e.g.,

overall health, alcohol and drug use, presence of physical violence) might have provided

better prediction of change in perceived relationship quality.

Several additional hypothesized relationships were also not supported. The lack of

significance for fathers' provision of monetary support was unexpected. It would seem

that fathers' lack of monetary support might well be interpreted by mothers as indicating

a lack of investment in them or their shared child, and following Parent Investment

Theory should lead to diminished perceived relationship quality over time. However, it

may be that fathers' lack of monetary provision may simply be an accepted "fact" that is

typical of the lives of this low-income sample population. Finally, joint activities with

one's partner did not predict changes in perceived relationship quality for either mothers

or fathers. This lack of support may reflect the results reported by Crawford et al. (2002)

in which the association between leisure and perceived relationship quality may be less

robust than reported previously in the literature and more dependent upon nuances

between whether the leisure activities were preferred by either or both partners. In the

current dataset only global items were available assessing whether a parent engaged in

three types of joint activities with their partner rather than more detailed items

specifically assessing whether the joint activities were preferred or not.

In bivariate correlations, education was significantly associated with a number of

other predictor variables including age at pregnancy, cohabitation, father's presence at

childbirth, fathers' provision of money, and fathers' provision of transportation support. However, education was not associated with change in perceived relationship quality at the bivariate level nor was it predictive of change in perceived relationship quality in the regression analysis. Although the main effect of education was not significant, a gender X education interaction was significant. For mothers, there was no link between her education and perceived relationship quality. However, fathers with less than a high school education experienced less decline in perceived relationship quality than fathers with more education. This finding was contrary to expectations and prior research (Bumpass et al., 1991; Kurdek, 1993) and it may relate to a diminished expectation for quality relationships among fathers with less education. Although clearly speculative, fathers with less education may be more likely to accept that their current situation – including the relationship they share with their partner – represents "their lot in life" and as such they are more accepting of their coparenting relationship.

As hypothesized, fathers' presence at childbirth did predict less decline in perceived relationship quality. Fathers' presence at the hospital was very common in this sample (i.e., 81 % reported being present), and it appeared to lessen the overall decline in perceived relationship quality. Conversely, his absence was also predictive of greater declines in perceived relationship quality. As has been shown in the literature, unmarried mothers and fathers almost always want the baby's father to be involved (McLanahan & Carlson, 2002) and further, his involvement at birth translated into more financial support over time for mother and child and was associated with better child outcomes (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). In a similar manner discussed below, these fragile family fathers may

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face any number of potential risk factors and limitations on access to resources, but their ability to show up at the hospital and to acknowledge their child may well be particularly salient for mothers and it may have longer-term implications for his child. Inroads are already being made within the prevention and applied field to recognize the importance of father involvement at the time of childbirth and to encourage his presence. For example, the Illinois Fatherhood Initiative works to help fathers, especially marginalized fathers, become active parts of their child's life from birth through participation in the national model entitled "Boot Camp for New Dads," a hospital-based program. New fathers are provided with support and encouragement during this transition (http://www.bootcampfornewdads.org/).

The three additional variables that did predict changes in perceived relationship quality did so in ways that were not hypothesized. First, estimating that the chance of marriage was either good or certain predicted decreases in perceived relationship quality. The more certain one was of the likelihood of marriage at Wave 1, the greater the decline in perceived relationship quality by Wave 2. Second, being in a steady relationship predicted changes in perceived relationship quality, but predicted greater rather than less decline. Third, fathers' provision of transportation support predicted greater decline in perceived relationship quality. A significant gender X father provision of transportation interaction was found that further clarified this finding. For fathers, there was no link between the provision of transportation support and their perceived relationship quality so whether or not they reported providing car rides around town or to medical appointments did not appear to impact decline in their perceived relationship quality. In

contrast, mothers who reported that fathers provided transportation support prior to the birth of the baby (Wave 1) experienced greater declines in perceived relationship quality than mothers who reported that fathers had not provided transportation support during the prenatal period.

Taken together, these three unexpected findings may provide support for the role of violated expectations in explaining how high levels of initial support predicted greater declines in perceived relationship quality one year later. In an earlier study, Belsky (1985) found that higher expectations during pregnancy were associated with greater negative change in relationship quality postpartum. In a related line of research, Stanley, Blumberg, and Markman (1999) offered that unrealistic expectations among engaged couples can lead to increased risk when expectations are not met: "Unmet expectations lead to disappointment and frustration, increasing the likelihood of negative interchanges that can erode and damage the relationship…" (p. 285). With the parents considered here, high expectations for marriage at childbirth, for example, might lead to dissatisfaction when the reality sets in one year later that marriage is an unlikely event at least in the near future. Being in a steady relationship at childbirth may lead to the expectation of permanency and future support that might not materialize. Finally, providing concrete support for daily living such as driving one's partner around during the prenatal period might lead to higher expectations for a certain type of relationship after childbirth that does not materialize one year later. Transportation might be particularly salient for mothers because it is something concrete that her baby's father can do to show his

support. Even if he can't buy Pampers, he can give her rides to appointments, the store, etc.

Study Limitations and Strengths

Four key limitations must be noted before interpreting the results of this study. First, the selected variables provided little predictive value (about 3% of the variance) in explaining change in perceived relationship quality across this transition. Clearly, additional variables must be identified and considered in order to better understand this transition. Second, this study was primarily exploratory with an understudied sample and as such, the variables selected and the analysis tools used were preliminary and basic. Variables tended toward structural (e.g., age at pregnancy, cohabitation status, education) rather than interactional or process and the primary analytic tools used were change scores, bivariate correlations, and simple regressions. Third, I constructed the dataset by entering mothers and fathers as separate cases and analyzing them in the same regression model rather than treating them as dyads. Although it was acceptable to include both mothers and fathers in the same analysis because of the resulting small to medium correlations on the outcome variable (Kenny et al., 2006), this design failed to capitalize upon the dyadic nature of the data. Follow-up studies would most certainly rely upon more sophisticated statistics that could provide better modeling of the data and confirmation of theoretically-driven models (such as the VSA model addressed below). Fourth, access to a unique sample through the FFCW Study was clearly an advantage of using this secondary dataset, but individual researchers have no control over what questions were asked. Measures of process variables that may have been beneficial to

include in more sophisticated analyses were not present in the dataset. In Wave 1 of the data, for example, no questions of maternal or paternal depression were asked so it was not possible to consider the role of depressive symptoms in this transition. In the final sense, the dataset was limited in what it could convey about the nature of the relationship between unmarried parents.

Two key strengths are noted for study. First, the focus on unmarried parents is relevant for the emerging literature on diversity of pathways to parenthood. As changing reproductive habits challenge assumptions about the normative trajectory of transition to parenthood from dating to marriage and then childbirth, this study adds a small contribution to our understanding of an alternative pathway to parenthood. What is of import is that these parents experience a slight decrease in perceived relationship quality across this transition and that this decrease is predicted most notably by variables suggestive of an incongruity between initial high levels of positive behaviors (e.g., providing transportation) and hopes for the relationship (e.g., being in a steady relationship and high expectations for marriage) at childbirth (Wave 1) and the reality of life as a single parent one year later (Wave 2). The second primary strength of this study emerges from the use of the FFCW Study dataset. This dataset provided a window into the lives of particularly vulnerable parents transitioning to first-time parenthood. For example, approximately 40% of the mothers and 20% of fathers were teenagers, and overall, approximately one-third had less than a high school education. As is typical with secondary datasets, it would not have been possible as an individual researcher to have gathered the depth and richness of these data. A related strength of drawing from this

dataset is the availability of self-reports from both mothers and fathers, which allowed the inclusion of unmarried fathers in the story of transition to parenthood.

Suggestions for Future Research

As recommended by Kluwer (2010), the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model of marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) could serve as a useful model for studying the transition to parenthood. Although the VSA model was developed as an integration of 50 years of theory and longitudinal research into marital outcomes, it appears to be potentially useful in describing complex relationship processes employed by unmarried parents to adaptively respond to the enduring vulnerabilities and stressors they bring into the parenting relationship. A key to the VSA model involves the relationship outcomes that result from how successful couples are in employing adaptive processes. From a research basis, the VSA model might provide greater dynamic insight into the nature of these relationships much more so than the static predictors considered in this study. Structural equation modeling is a logical fit for use with the VSA model because it would allow for exploration of relationship processes and proposed mediated paths with both partners' data in the same model. A model supported by research could prove to be considerably useful in the development of educational intervention programs designed to enhance the agency and resiliency of unmarried parents. If adaptive processes, for example, were found to impact the relationship between prebirth resources or vulnerabilities and relationship quality, new educational interventions could be developed to teach couples how to better communicate, resolve conflict, and show respect even in

the event that their relationship is ending (which is frequently the case for these unmarried parent couples).

Future research needs to include additional waves of data collected as part of the FFCW Study to consider the trajectory of change in relationship quality across time for unmarried parents. This study only considered change in perceived relationship quality through one year postpartum, but further consideration of change across the particularly vulnerable first few years following childbirth is needed. It is important to recall the instability of these relationships. Osborne and McLanahan (2007), for example, found in their research using the FFCW Study data that 50% of cohabiting, 69% of romantically involved but noncohabiting, and 74% of nonromantically involved parents experienced at least one relationship transition during the first three years following childbirth. Not only do many of these unmarried parents transition in their interpersonal relationships with each other, nonresidential fathers also appear to be less involved over time, with approximately half of fathers displaying low levels of involvement between years 1 and 3 following childbirth (Ryan et al., 2008). Because focus on unmarried parents is relatively new, additional investigation is also needed linking changes in relationship quality with child outcomes. Although there is support for the effects of unmarried parental relationship quality on child behavior problems (e.g., Spjeldnes & Choi, 2008), the impact of declines in relationship quality among unmarried parents on child outcomes remains unknown.

Finally, because Bronfenbrenner (1979) was correct in asserting that "the principal main effects are likely to be interactions" (p. 38), future research needs to

consider additional moderators of the relationship between predictor variables and change in relationship quality. As challenged by O'Brien (2005), a key research goal of family studies must be to move beyond studies of main effects and into analytic approaches that include moderation and mediation. It is a necessary first step to understand that an earlier event (e.g., age at childbirth, father involvement) is linked with a later event (e.g., change in relationship quality), but a much richer and more useful investigation must include the contextual considerations of "for whom are proposed links true" and "under what conditions." As discussed, gender moderated the association between change in perceived relationship quality and education and fathers' provision of transportation support. It may be plausible that some of the predictor variables included in this study might also moderate this relationship. For example, relationship length has been reported to moderate the association between age at pregnancy and changes in marital quality (Bouchard et al., 2008), so this moderator might also be applicable to unmarried parents and their relationship quality. The ability of researchers, family life educators, and clinicians to effect positive change in families will most likely arise as a result of additional research into the moderating processes that link characteristics of unmarried couples at childbirth with changes in relationship quality across the transition to parenthood.

Recommendations for Family Life Educators

As I posed in the outset of this study, results should ideally inform the practice intervention of family life educators and clinicians working with unmarried parents making the transition to parenthood. A meta-analysis of parenting interventions

conducted by Pinquart and Teubert (2010) lends support to the efficacy of programs impacting couple communication, well-being, adjustment, and parenting. They reported generally small effect sizes which is not surprising and is in keeping with results reported for similar types of interventions such as premarital education (for a meta-analysis, see Fawcett, Hawkins, Blachard, & Carroll, 2010). It is important to note that even small effects can lead to important support for couple relationships.

So what lessons can family life educators or clinicians draw from this study? I offer ten insights gleaned from this study which may be helpful to family life educators and clinicians developing direct intervention programs with unmarried parents transitioning to parenthood. First, it is clear that professionals intervening with unmarried parents need to check their own assumptions about these couples to ensure that societal images or personal biases do not override the diversity which is the reality of these parents. Unmarried parents are not a monolithic social phenomenon consisting only of teenage mothers without education who are unconnected from their baby's father. In fact, the majority of this sample consisted of parents well into their twenties with at least a high school education and who were involved with each other.

Second, these mothers and fathers expected that they would marry the baby's other parent, even if that additional transition was unlikely to occur with this partner. Successful intervention programs will likely strike a balance between offering preparation for the small percent of parents transitioning into marriage while helping the larger percentage of parents improve their coparenting relationships in the face of the disappointment of unmet expectations.

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Third, these couples viewed themselves as being in steady relationships at childbirth. These pregnancies do not appear to be the result of random hooking up and hanging out, but rather are a natural result of established sexual relationships. The practical import for educators and clinicians is to develop programs that respect the commitment these parents report for each other, regardless of how fragile that commitment may prove to be in the long run. Again, the reality exists that many of these intimate relationships will not endure over the course of the baby's first few years of life, but educators and clinicians can help couples build strong coparenting relationships based off of this initial commitment.

Fourth, these are not "deadbeat dads" removed from the responsibilities associated with parenthood. Many of these fathers showed up at the hospital to be part of childbirth and they provided money and transportation help. On multiple measures they engaged in concrete actions that communicated their desire to be involved. It is imperative to design resiliency-based programs that acknowledge and affirm the roles that single fathers already play in the lives of their coparent and in the lives of their child(ren). For a more detailed presentation on encouraging fathers' involvement post-birth, educators and clinicians might consider Alan Hawkins and David Dollahite's (1997) edited work, *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives*.

Fifth, perceived relationship quality is generally high at childbirth and on average declines across the transition to parenthood (at least measured up to one year postpartum). At the same time, developing interventions that are offered to couples prior

to childbirth has been shown to provide at least some protection against this decline (Pinquart & Teubert, 2010).

Sixth, almost a quarter of these couples increased in their perceived relationship quality. Interventions need to respond to the particular needs of couples, so educators and clinicians should recognize that for some couples childbirth brings an increase in expressions of compromise, affection, encouragement, and an avoidance of criticism. Even for couples reporting this increase, intervention is appropriate for fortifying and encouraging continued healthy interpersonal and coparenting relationships.

Seventh, mothers generally have a greater decline in perceived relationship quality than fathers. Not explored empirically in this study, other research has indicated that mothers as compared with fathers have a greater tendency to experience inequitable division of household labor, greater discrepancy between their expectations about life before and after childbirth, and are more likely to suffer from chronic depression (Kluwer, 2010). It might be appropriate, for example, for educators and clinicians to specifically develop interventions targeting the declines in relationship quality experienced by mothers through special support groups or psychoeducational activities.

Eighth, initial high levels of expectations about the couple relationship is associated with greater decline in perceived relationship quality. When expectations are high that marriage is likely and couples are in a steady relationship at childbirth, greater declines in perceived relationship quality were found. For mothers, greater declines were found when fathers provided transportation support at or before childbirth. Educators and clinicians could intervene by exploring pre-birth and postpartum expectations about life

as unmarried coparents. Although the purpose of this intervention would not be to convince couples of the unlikelihood of marriage, for example, it could prove useful to help couples consider how to fashion a strong working relationship even if marriage does not occur or if they do not remain romantically involved. Helping couples realistically approach their relationship would certainly be an advantage in assisting them to address the realities of coparenting. As well, it could prove very helpful to assist fathers in recognizing how their support of mothers (e.g., providing transportation or performing chores) could impact upon the quality of the relationship with their baby's mother.

Ninth, attendance at religious services did not predict changes in perceived relationship quality. At the same time, what was not tested in this study was the association between change in perceived relationship quality and personal religious practices and personal religiousness. Many family life education programs are offered by religious organizations, so educators and clinicians should be careful not to assume that attendance at religious services is necessarily indicative of positive change in relationship quality across this transition.

Tenth, and finally, outcome evaluation is critical for assessing whether an intervention is efficacious. Additional statistical tests, some more complex than change scores, correlations, and simple regressions, are certainly appropriate for ensuring rigorous scientific investigation. For educators and clinicians, however, the use of change scores, correlations, and simple regressions might be the best tool for the purpose at hand. Knowing that parents either improved in their relationship quality or at least slowed the decline during the period of intervention is certainly important to know. It is not possible

to attribute causal connection between enrollment in a parenting intervention and significant changes in relationship quality without an experimental design, nonetheless it is appropriate to take a measurement of relationship quality before and after an intervention in order to detect changes. Ideally, though, the use of a true experimental design with the inclusion of a control group would potentially provide a tremendous amount of support for the impact of an intervention.

Overall Summary

This dissertation was conceptualized and written through a family life education lens. The research questions posed, the theories selected, the level of analyses run, and the recommendations provided were all offered with the clear intent to assist other family life educators and clinicians in developing programs that foster strong and healthy relationships among unmarried parents transitioning to first-time parenthood. I believe fervently that the knowledge stored in the pages, volume after volume, of our most respected journals needs to be accessed by family life educators and clinicians and applied to the work of helping couples make successful transitions across the lifespan. It is certainly supported in the literature that well trained professionals have greater impact on couple-focused interventions than paraprofessionals (Pinquart & Teubert, 2010). My purpose here was to examine the transition of an understudied population of unmarried parents to provide some insight, albeit small, that might aid in this endeavor. The words of Theodora Ooms and Pamela Wilson (2004) provide strong encouragement as to why works such as this one need to be carried out:

The research identifies the time of a child's birth as a 'reachable moment' when unmarried couples are committed to each other and their child and when they are optimistic about marrying. (p. 442)….Relationship and marriage education is not going to solve the multiple problems of poor and near-poor families, but if tailored to the diverse needs and circumstances of low-income individuals, we believe that it can make an important difference in their lives. (p. 446)

Debates may continue as to the appropriateness and ultimate value to families of government policies that seek to alter human behavior, but at the same time researchers, family life educators, and clinicians have the opportunity to positively influence the wellbeing of families through the application of social science research.

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