

Marital Quality Ten Years After the Transition to Parenthood: Implications of the Timing of Parenthood and the Division of Housework

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Abstract:

Using a sample of 180 dual-earner, nondivorced couples, this study explored how the timing of parenthood and the division of housework are related to husbands' and wives' marital quality during the childrearing years. Hypothesized to be “at risk” for negative marital evaluations were early first-birth couples who divided tasks in a less-traditional manner and delayed first-birth couples who divided tasks in a traditional manner. Analyses revealed that husbands and wives in the “risk” groups evaluated their marriages more negatively, suggesting that congruence between behaviors, background, and attitudes is important for marital quality. In addition, early first-birth couples evaluated their marriages more poorly than did the “on time” or “delayed” couples. Wives' gender-typed attitudes emerged as a significant covariate in the analyses but did not account for the effects of the timing of parenthood and the timing of parenthood × the division of housework interactions.

Keywords: division of labor | housework | life course | marital quality | timing of parenthood | transition to parenthood

Article:

The past several decades have ushered in significant changes in marital and family patterns in the United States. One recent dramatic change is the increased variability in the age at which married couples have their first child, with many couples waiting until wives are in their 30s and even 40s to become parents. Although the pattern to delay childbearing mirrors demographic trends before the somewhat anomalous decade of the 1950s, it is more common in the United States today than at any other time on record (Baldwin & Nord, 1984) and is predicted to continue, or even increase, in the future (Rindfuss, Morgan, & Swicegood, 1988; Waldrop, 1994).

Nonetheless, over a third of all women in the United States have their first child before age 25 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995).

This increased heterogeneity in the timing of the transition to parenthood suggests that earlier versus later timed parents may be on different life-course trajectories (Coltrane, 1996; Coltrane & Ishii-Kuntz, 1992; Daniels & Weingarten, 1982). Becoming a parent at age 21 is a qualitatively different experience than becoming a parent for the first time at age 32—not only because age serves as a marker for personal development and maturity, but because age signals differences in life experiences in the realms of education, financial security, marital stability, career establishment, and in the sense of readiness for the parental role (Booth & Edwards, 1985; Coltrane; Coltrane & Ishii-Kuntz; May, 1982). Husbands and wives who delay parenthood are better educated, have higher incomes and occupational prestige, and are more likely to have planned the birth of their child than other couples (Baldwin & Nord, 1984; Coltrane; Daniels & Weingarten; Rindfuss et. al., 1988). Although wives continue to assume more responsibility for housework than do husbands, couples who become parents later tend to divide housework along less traditional lines than those who become parents earlier (Coltrane, 1990, 1996; Daniels & Weingarten), suggesting that these groups have different norms about the best way to divide family work that coincide with their life experiences.

In this article, I propose that the links between the timing of parenthood and marital quality will vary based on couples' family roles—specifically their division of housework. Few empirical studies to date have addressed the implications of delayed childbearing for marital quality. Given young parents' greater risk for marital instability (Booth & Edwards, 1985) and older first-time parents' access to resources (i.e., education, income, occupational prestige), one might entertain a main effects hypothesis (i.e., that couples who have their first child earlier in life would report lower marital quality than those who delay parenthood). Adhering, however, to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) suggestion that “in ecological research, the principal main effects are likely to be interactions” (p. 38), a more complex relationship between the timing of parenthood, spouses' division of housework, and their marital quality is suggested: In considering what might place earlier or later timed parents at risk for lower marital quality, attention is focused on those couples whose life patterns and behavior appear incongruent. Specifically, it is proposed that the marital implications of earlier versus later timed parenthood depend on couples' division of household labor.

The timing of the transition to parenthood and marital quality

Why consider the timing of parenthood when examining marital quality? The timing of life events and transitions in individuals' lives is at the forefront of life course theory (for a review, see Elder, 1998), which holds that “the meaning of a transition has much to do with its timing” (p. 956). The implications of a given transition depend on the timing of the event relative to normative patterns and cultural expectations (e.g., normative ages for marriage, having children, obtaining an education, and expectations regarding the sequencing of these events). The timing

of marriage has already been shown to predict marital quality, with those marrying earlier being at greater risk for marital dissolution than those marrying later (Booth & Edwards, 1985). What is less clear, however, is whether and how the timing of parenthood is linked with marital quality.

The transition to parenthood and its impact on marriage has been studied extensively, from early works emphasizing the transition as a time of crisis and downturns in marital quality (Hobbs, 1965; LeMasters, 1957) to more recent studies pointing to the considerable variety of ways that couples handle this transition (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; McHale & Huston, 1985; White & Booth, 1985; for reviews, see Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Veroff, Young, & Coon, 1997). There is little doubt that the marital relationship changes with the advent of parenthood, but the picture emerging from recent research is more complex than the monolithic negative view that characterized early research in this area. Recent longitudinal studies and research designs employing childless couple comparison groups have led to the conclusion that couples tend to experience declines in marital quality during the early years of marriage regardless of whether they become parents. When compared with childless couples, however, new parents tend to have a more traditional division of labor as well as lower levels of marital companionship (McHale & Huston). Thus, parenthood introduces a new set of demands that require adaptation on the parts of husbands and wives, but not necessarily marital distress. In addition, contemporary research has shown that husbands' and wives' experiences of this transition depend on how they negotiate the new demands on their time, with some couples faring better following the birth of their first child, others worse, and still others seemingly unchanged (Belsky & Kelly; Belsky & Rovine, 1990). What is not known is whether couples who negotiate this major life transition fare better or worse depending on when in their lives they became parents. Given the marital challenges that come with parenthood, it may be that the timing of this significant life course transition is a strong predictor of marital quality.

What role does the division of household labor play?

Exploratory, qualitative studies have laid the groundwork for further study on the connections between the timing of parenthood, couples' division of housework, and their marital quality. For example, through retrospective interviews with 86 couples, Daniels and Weingarten (1982) found that husbands and wives who became parents in their late teen years or early 20s tended to divide household tasks along traditional gender lines, with wives being responsible for the bulk of the housework and child care. In contrast, couples who had their first child in their late 20s or 30s had a more collaborative approach to housework and child care following the birth of their first child. Although wives still tended to be responsible for a greater share of these tasks than husbands, the disparity between husbands' and wives' contributions was less than that of the early-timed couples. More recent exploratory studies uphold these findings and suggest that couples who delay parenthood until their late 20s or 30s tend to share tasks more than those who have children earlier (e.g., Coltrane, 1996).

Building on these exploratory works, Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz (1992) conducted the only quantitative study to date addressing the connections between the timing of parenthood and husbands' involvement in housework. Using a nationally representative sample of both dual- and single-earner married men and women with children under the age of 18, Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz found that when husbands and wives became parents early (i.e., when husbands were 27 or younger), men were more likely to become involved in feminine-typed household tasks when their wives pushed for it and had the relative resources (i.e., income) to be persuasive. In contrast, when husbands and wives made the transition later in life (i.e., when husbands were 28 or older), men were more likely to become involved in family work in line with their own ideological preferences, which tended to be liberal. These findings underscore the variability in earlier and later timed couples' family roles and suggests that the division of labor for parents in the midst of raising children is negotiated through different processes for couples who make the transition earlier versus later. What is still not known is whether the division of labor and the timing of parenthood, taken together, have implications for marital well-being.

The significant body of research that exists on the division of labor in the home suggests that there are no simple connections between the division of housework and marital outcomes. Instead, it is the incongruence between spouses' values and their involvement in housework that has negative implications for marriage (McHale & Crouter, 1992). Given that the impact of the timing of an event is related to “the scheduling of multiple trajectories and their synchrony” (Elder, 1995, p.114), I further suggest that incongruence in life experiences may be linked to marital outcomes. For example, early works examining the links between the timing of parenthood and the division of housework suggest that couples who become parents at younger ages may be on a more traditional life course trajectory (Coltrane, 1996; Daniels & Weingarten, 1982). These young parents' lives are often characterized by foreclosed educational opportunities, little exposure to or experience with alternative strategies for dividing family work, and—with the advent of parenthood at a young age—an early adoption of a traditional division of roles. For these early-first-birth couples, a traditional division of labor, one in which the wife is responsible for the bulk of the housework, is likely to be accepted as normative, expected, and familiar, even when both parents are employed. An arrangement in which husbands contribute substantially to housework is incongruent with life as it has unfolded for these couples and may therefore be experienced as problematic for both husbands and wives in these families. For husbands, involvement in housework may be resented and perceived as falling outside the boundaries of their family role. For early-first-birth wives, who are likely to equate housework with “womens' work,” husbands' involvement in housework may be experienced as a personal failure and a reminder that their division of labor is not as it “should” be (Coltrane, 1990). As Coltrane (1996) wrote:

As men begin to assume more responsibility for housework and children, we can expect mixed results. ... If women do not want more help, and do not want to give up control over home and children, being forced to share can have negative impacts on their health

and marital satisfaction. Some women continue to feel that asking their husbands to do housework demeans their masculinity and represents a failure of their manhood. For these women, increased sharing is experienced as troublesome. (p. 231)

In short, departures from the “familiar” may challenge marital quality for early transitioning couples.

In contrast, dual-earner couples who delay parenthood are better educated, earn higher incomes, work in more prestigious jobs, and are thus more likely to have encountered a broader range of “others” from whom to learn about alternative strategies for the division of housework than couples who become parents at younger ages. In addition, unlike couples who become parents at younger ages, these husbands and wives have had more time to mature and to experiment with adult role-sharing arrangements and task negotiation in a variety of close relationships before the arrival of children. Unlike spouses who become parents in their early 20s, later transitioning husbands and wives are likely to enter parenthood with a college degree, a significant number of years in the workforce, and more years of adult housework responsibility (whether this be living on their own, with other family members, with a roommate, or with their spouse). Taken together, these experiences provide a “mental backdrop” of alternative strategies for dividing family roles that counter arrangements in which wives assume sole responsibility for the bulk of the household tasks. Therefore, in contrast to early-timed parents, a traditional division of housework is more likely to be incongruent with the experiences of parents who experience a later transition to parenthood.

Research hypotheses and goals

Given the different routes into the division of housework for couples who become parents early versus late, and using Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz's (1992) research as a foundation, it was hypothesized that marital quality would vary as a function of both the timing of parenthood and spouses' relative involvement in housework. (Marital quality was not expected to vary as a function of the division of housework alone.) Here the focus was on the “match” or congruence between the timing of parenthood and spouses' division of housework. It was expected that early-first-birth couples in which wives assumed responsibility for the bulk of the housework would report higher levels of marital quality than those “early” couples who divided tasks in a less traditional manner. A different pattern was anticipated for “delayed” parents, with such couples being at risk for poor marital well-being when wives assumed responsibility for the housework. No predictions were made concerning those couples who transitioned “on time.” With these hypotheses in mind, the study sought (a) to examine how the timing of parenthood and the division of housework are connected to dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction, love, and conflict and (b) to compare husbands' and wives' experiences in the same family.

Most studies exploring the transition to parenthood sample participants in relatively short periods of time following the birth of their first child—clearly a time of unprecedented change and

adjustment in the family system. In contrast to earlier works, this study investigates the implications of the timing of the birth of the first child and couples' division of household tasks for marital quality at the close of the first decade of childrearing. Here, the importance of the timing of parenthood is examined using a volunteer sample of dual-earner couples with school-age children participating in a study of marital and family relationships. Hence, couples in the study are in relatively stable relationships and at a point in their marriages where family role patterns are well established.

Method

Participants

The sample was drawn from the first phase of a short-term longitudinal study of family relationships and child development. Two hundred and three nondivorced, predominantly dual-earner families, who had at least two children in the 6-to-12 age group, were recruited via letters sent home to families in 16 school districts in a Northeastern state. The sample was divided into two cohorts. In 1995, 100 families were recruited to cohort 1; in 1996, 103 families were recruited to cohort 2. School district's distributed letters describing the study to all families with a child in the fourth or fifth grade. Because access to confidential school records indicating the number of eligible families who declined to participate was not granted, it was impossible to estimate response rates. For those eligible families who expressed an interest in the project, however, the participation rate was 95%. The letter to families described the research effort in general terms, indicated that families would receive a \$100 honorarium for each phase of participation in the 3-year longitudinal study, listed criteria for participation, and asked families to return a self-addressed, stamped postcard to the project if interested in participating. The criteria for participation were as follows: (a) the couple had to be maritally intact, and the children had to be the biological or adopted offspring of both parents (stepfamilies and blended families were excluded because dynamics in these families vary considerably from those in nonstepfamilies); (b) the eldest child in the family had to be in the fourth or fifth grade; and (c) there was at least one additional sibling 1 to 4 years younger. The study also sought to include as many couples as possible in which both spouses were employed at least part-time, currently the modal arrangement for two-parent U.S. families.

Of the 203 couples in the study, 17 were omitted from these analyses because the wife was not employed; two couples because the oldest child was adopted and information on the timing of the adoption was not available; one couple because the husband was missing a significant amount of data; and three couples because, despite screening efforts, they had children older than the targets of the study. Thus, the sample on which the analyses are based included 180 couples—a White sample diverse in terms of socioeconomic status (see Table 1). Participants' job prestige, classified according to the National Opinion Research Council (NORC) coding system (Nakao & Treas, 1994), ranged from 22.3 (janitor) through 74.77 (lawyer), with average scores of 49.50 and 48.24 for husbands and wives, respectively. Occupations classified in this

middle range included positions such as skilled laborers (e.g., carpenters, electricians, plumbers), sales representatives, secretaries, and postal carriers. Four wives in the sample were full-time students. Participants resided primarily in small cities, towns, and rural areas. Sample sizes in some analyses change slightly because of missing data on the dependent variables of interest.

[Table 1 Omitted]

Procedures

Data collection procedures included home visits and a series of telephone interviews. First, during home interviews that averaged 2 to 3 h in duration, husbands and wives were interviewed separately about their marital and family relationships and psychological well-being. Where literacy was a problem, items were read to the respondent. During the 2 to 3 weeks following the home interviews, a series of seven evening phone calls (5 weekdays, 2 weekend days) was conducted to obtain details about family members' daily activities, including husbands' and wives' reports of their daily participation in household tasks. Wives were interviewed on 2 weeknights and 1 weekend night; husbands were interviewed on 2 weeknights and one weekend night; and one call (always conducted on a weeknight) included separate interviews with both spouses.

Home interview measures

Timing of parenthood

Early and delayed childbearing has been variously defined in empirical work and may fluctuate because of demographic patterns and age norms. This sample was divided into thirds based on mothers' ages at the time of the birth of their first child. Both husbands and wives reported their own ages and their children's ages to the nearest month. Parents' ages at the birth of their first child were calculated by subtracting the age of the firstborn child from each parent's age. Because the correlation between mothers' and fathers' ages at first birth was quite high (i.e., $r = .71$, $p < .0001$), the age of either spouse could have been used as an indicator of the timing of parenthood. Using mothers' ages at the birth of their first child, couples were classified as “early” ($n = 62$) when wives became parents at age 24 or younger, “on time” ($n = 59$) when wives became parents between the ages of 24 and 28, and “delayed” ($n = 59$) when wives became parents at age 28 or older. This grouping strategy approximates national trends for women in the mid-1980s when 71% of 20- to 24-year-old women, 42% of 25- to 29-year-old women, and 26% of women aged 30 to 34 were childless (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995).

Years married before the birth of first child

Couples reported the number of years they had been married. The number of years married before the birth of their first child was determined by subtracting the child's age at the time of the home interview from the number of years the couple had been married.

Education

Husbands and wives reported the number of years of education they had obtained.

Income

Husbands and wives reported their annual gross wages received from paid employment.

Spouses' gender-role attitudes

Husbands and wives completed Spence and Helmreich's (1972) Attitudes Toward Women Scale. On this 15-item questionnaire, respondents are asked to agree or disagree with a variety of statements about women's roles in society (e.g., "If both husband and wife are working outside the home, they should share equally in routine household chores, such as washing dishes and doing laundry.") Response options range from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). High scores indicate more traditional attitudes. Cronbach's alphas for this sample were .74 and .82, for husbands and wives, respectively.

Marital love and conflict

Husbands and wives completed two subscales from Braiker & Kelley's (1979) Relationship Questionnaire, a measure in which respondents indicate their feelings regarding various dimensions of their marriage on a 9-point scale. Nine items tapped spouses' perceptions of marital love (e.g., "To what extent do you love your partner at this stage?"), and five items tapped perceptions of marital conflict (e.g., "How often do you feel angry or resentful toward your partner?"). Higher scores on each subscale indicated greater levels of love and conflict. Cronbach alphas for marital love for this sample were .91 and .92, for husbands and wives, respectively. Alpha reliabilities for marital conflict were .61 for husbands and .70 for wives. Husbands' and wives' subscale scores were significantly correlated (i.e., $r = .51, p < .01$; $r = .39, p < .01$; for marital love and conflict, respectively).

Marital satisfaction

The Aspects of Married Life Questionnaire (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986) assessed each spouse's satisfaction with various domains of marriage. Respondents were asked to rate on a 9-point scale (1 = *very dissatisfied*; 9 = *very satisfied*) their satisfaction with seven domains of married life (e.g., marital communication, division of household tasks, and marital decision making). Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for this scale were .86 for husbands and .88 for wives. Husbands' and wives' reports of marital satisfaction were significantly correlated (i.e., $r = .37, p < .01$).

Measures derived from telephone interviews

Division of housework

Data on couples' division of housework were collected using a cued-recall procedure. Spouses were given activity lists at the end of the home interviews that they then used for reporting a variety of activities, including household tasks, during the telephone interviews. Following Coltrane's (1990) suggestion to move from an examination of the division of total household labor to a more narrow focus on the daily, repetitive, and time-consuming tasks traditionally performed by women, the current investigation focused on feminine-typed household tasks. During each of four calls, spouses were asked (a) how often they performed each of four traditionally feminine household tasks (i.e., do dishes, prepare a meal, vacuum or clean, and laundry), (b) how long each activity lasted (in minutes), and (c) who else had participated in the activity. In the analyses reported here, the division of housework was operationalized as the proportion of total time (in minutes) spent on feminine-typed housework by either one or both spouses that was performed by wives. The top third of the sample was categorized as "traditional" ($n= 59$) because wives completed 90% or more of these feminine-typed household tasks. Couples in which wives completed less than 90% of these tasks were classified as "less traditional" ($n= 121$). We divided the sample in this manner for the several reasons. It is normative in our society for dual-earner wives to complete a greater share of feminine-typed household tasks than their husbands. (For example, for the majority of the less traditional couples in this study (61%), husbands completed 20 to 40% of the housework. The sample yielded only seven families, less than 1% of the less traditional group, in which husbands did more than 50% of the housework.) Given this, we were most interested in examining how dual-earner couples' marital quality varied as a function of the timing of parenthood for those dual-earner couples in more "extreme" arrangements (e.g., those who divided household tasks along traditional lines with wives completing the great majority of the housework) compared with couples in which husbands contributed to housework in a more meaningful way.

Results

To place these results in context, preliminary analyses were conducted in which the possible correlates of marital timing and the division of tasks were examined. Next, hypotheses were addressed using a mixed model multivariate analysis of covariance and a series of analyses of covariance with husbands' and wives' perceptions of their marital quality as dependent variables. Because cell sizes were unequal, Type III sums of squares were examined (Lewis & Kiren, 1977). Using mixed model ANCOVAs rather than a regression strategy has several advantages. First, it increases statistical power because husbands' and wives' perceptions are examined in one analysis. Second, it allows for the preservation of the relationship dyad as the unit of analysis and examination of two distinct issues: (a) between-subjects effects indicate patterns of marital quality that cut across both spouses and (b) interactions with "spouse" indicate potentially important intrafamilial differences in the way husbands versus wives respond to the conditions in question. All significant findings were followed up with Tukey tests or, in cases in which we had a priori hypotheses, Bonferroni's t tests. Effect sizes were calculated using the d statistic; $d= .20$ is

a small effect, $d = .50$ is a moderate effect, and $d = .80$ is a large effect (Cohen, 1988; Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1989).

Correlates of the timing of parenthood and the division of housework

In these preliminary analyses, a series of 2 (spouse) \times 3 (timing of parenthood) \times 2 (division of housework) mixed model analyses of variance (ANOVAs treating “spouse” as a repeated measure where relevant) was performed, with spouses' education, income, gender-typed attitudes, and years married before the birth of the first child as the dependent variables. Results showed that spouses' education and years married before the birth of their first child did not vary as a function of the division of household tasks. Several findings helped to validate the division of housework groups, however. Although, on average, husbands earned more than wives, the difference in husbands' and wives' incomes was greater in the traditional group ($M = \$25,528$) than in the less traditional group ($M = \$19,218$) as illustrated by a significant spouse \times division of housework within subjects effect [$F(1, 171) = 4.46, p < .05, d = .23$]. In addition, couples who divided housework along traditional lines held more traditional attitudes about appropriate roles for men and women ($M = 28.41$, averaged across spouse) than less traditional spouses ($M = 25.55$) as indicated by a significant between subjects effect [$F(1, 180) = 8.68, p < .01, d = .61$].

Significant between subjects effects for the timing of parenthood for education [$F(2, 180) = 15.58, p < .0001$] and attitudes [$F(2, 180) = 5.99, p < .01$] were followed up with Tukey tests. Delayed couples had the highest levels of education ($M = 15.75$ years, averaged across spouse), followed by on-time couples ($M = 14.67$ years), followed by those couples who had their children early ($M = 13.57$ years). Effect sizes ranged from .54 to 1.25. A similar pattern emerged for gender role attitudes ($d = .40$ to $d = .87$). Early transitioning partners had the most conservative views ($M = 28.46$ averaged across spouse), followed by on time couples ($M = 26.61$). Delayed couples held the least conservative views of the three groups ($M = 24.27$).

Results of Tukey follow-up tests for timing \times division of housework interactions for both income [$F(2, 171) = 4.52, p < .01$] and marriage-birth interval [$F(2, 180) = 4.83, p < .01$] pointed attention to the delayed couples where the very traditional and less traditional groups differed significantly ($d = 1.13$). In delayed couples with a very traditional division of tasks, husbands earned significantly more money than their wives (i.e., \$44,213 more on average). In contrast, the gap between husbands' and wives' earnings was significantly smaller (i.e., husbands making \$14,722 more than wives, on average) for delayed couples with a less traditional division of housework. Follow-up tests for the timing \times division of tasks interaction for marriage-birth interval also suggested that the action was in the delayed couples' group. Although traditional and less traditional couples in both the early ($M = 1.60$ and $M = .97$ for the traditional and less traditional groups, respectively) and on-time groups ($M = 3.58$ and $M = 3.24$ for traditional and less traditional groups, respectively) did not differ from each other in the number of years they were married before the birth of their first child, delayed couples who divided tasks in a less

traditional manner were married for a longer period of time ($M= 4.28$) before the birth of their first child than delayed couples who divided tasks in a traditional manner ($M= 2.29$; $d= .94$).

Marital quality as a function of the timing of parenthood and division of housework

To ensure that the substantive results would not simply reflect the group differences we found in social class (i.e., income and education), gender-typed attitudes, or years married before the birth of the first child, we treated the background variables as covariates. Only a few modest correlations between the covariates and the marital outcomes of interest emerged. Years married before parenthood was significantly correlated with husbands' satisfaction ($r= .20, p < .01$), wives' satisfaction ($r= .16, p < .05$) and wives' conflict ($r=-.17, p < .05$). Other modest correlations included husbands' education with wives' satisfaction ($r= .18, p < .01$), husbands' gender-role attitudes with husbands' satisfaction ($r=-.15, p < .05$) and wives' gender role attitudes with husbands' love ($r= .16, p < .05$).

Controlling for husbands' and wives' education, income, gender-typed attitudes and years married before the birth of their first child, a 3 (timing of parenthood) \times 2 (division of housework) \times 2 (spouse) multivariate analyses of variance (MANCOVA) was first performed, treating "spouse" as a repeated measure and marital love, conflict, and satisfaction as dependent variables. This analysis yielded a significant within subjects spouse \times timing of parenthood \times division of housework effect related to the central hypothesis of the study, $F(10, 171) = 3.55, p < .001$. To follow up this finding, a series of three ANCOVAs were conducted using the same design and focusing on marital love, conflict, and satisfaction as dependent variables. Effects for the timing of parenthood provided a test of the main effects hypothesis and were no higher than trend levels for each of the dependent variables [i.e., $F(2, 171) = 2.59, p= .08$; $F(2, 171) = 2.25, p= .10$; $F(2, 171) = 1.83, p= .16$ for marital love, conflict, and satisfaction, for between subjects effects, respectively].

As hypothesized, however, consistent, significant results were found for the more complex timing \times division of housework interaction effects [i.e., $F(2, 171) = 2.90; p < .05$; $F(2, 171) = 6.15; p < .001$; $F(2, 171) = 2.96; p < .05$, for marital love, conflict, and satisfaction, respectively]. Bonferroni's t tests showed that early, first-time parents with a less traditional division of labor reported higher levels of marital conflict and lower levels of love during the childrearing years than couples who had their children early and divided tasks in a traditional manner (see Table 2). Effect sizes were .50 and .70 for conflict and love respectively. Traditional and less traditional early-timed wives, but not husbands, differed significantly in marital satisfaction, with wives in traditional marriages reporting greater marital satisfaction than those in marriages in which tasks were divided in a less traditional manner ($d= .41$). As predicted, the opposite pattern of findings emerged for the delayed group. Delayed, first-time parents who divided tasks in a traditional manner reported less marital satisfaction and greater marital conflict than delayed couples who divided tasks more equally ($d= .87$ and $.89$ for satisfaction and conflict, respectively). No differences between the division of housework groups were found for delayed couples' reports of

love. There were no differences in marital satisfaction or conflict between the less traditional and traditional couples who transitioned to parenthood “on time.” Wives' gender-role attitudes exerted significant or near significant effects on the outcomes for marital love [$F(1, 171) = 4.34, p < .05$] and marital satisfaction [$F(1, 171) = 3.26, p = .07$]. Husbands' and wives' income, education, years married before the birth of their first child, and husbands' gender-role attitudes were not significant covariates.

[Table 2 Omitted]

Post hoc analyses

Concerned that perhaps the variable representing the timing of parenthood simply was acting as a proxy for wives' gender-role attitudes, timing of parenthood was replaced with a dichotomous variable reflecting wives' gender role attitudes (using a median split), and a new series of analyses was performed. These analyses yielded no significant main effects for wives' attitudes or any significant interactions involving wives' attitudes. Therefore, the timing of parenthood is not a proxy for gender-role attitudes.

Discussion

The hypothesized relationships between couples' timing of parenthood, their division of feminine-typed household tasks, and their marital quality during the childrearing years were partially supported in these analyses. Results indicate that the timing of the transition to parenthood alone does not have implications for couples' marital well-being 10 years later and that examining the different routes into the division of housework for couples who become parents early versus late sheds further light on couples' reports of marital love, satisfaction, and conflict during the childrearing years. More specifically, results showed that although a less traditional division of labor implies marital discord for couples who become parents early, this pattern is associated with positive marital outcomes for parents who delay childbearing. In addition, findings revealed similar patterns for husbands and wives, the second goal of the study, as indicated by the consistently significant “between subjects effects” in these models.

Why are early-transitioning parents with a less traditional division of housework at risk for poorer marital quality? In contrast to couples who have their first child later, the early-first-birth couples—the least educated and most conservative in terms of gender-role attitudes of the three groups—may be more likely to use their families of origin and traditional societal norms as models of domestic labor. The husbands and wives in this investigation are likely to have experienced a traditional, gender-segregated division of household tasks in their own families of origin. Thus, despite their dual-earner status, these early-transitioning couples may experience less conflict in their marriages when they have a traditional division of labor—with the wife being responsible for the great majority of the daily household tasks—than when their division of housework is more collaborative. Wives in these families may experience husbands' involvement in housework as a troublesome reminder that life has not unfolded as anticipated and that they

(still employed outside the home full-time despite their more conservative attitudes) are forced by circumstance to share housework and give up control in a traditionally feminine-typed domain of family life. The between-subjects findings suggest that marital quality is not only compromised for wives in these situations, but for their husbands as well. These men, in the midst of rearing school-age children and working in lower paying jobs, may resent their involvement in traditionally feminine household tasks, feeling that their time and energy should be focused on breadwinning. These negative feelings regarding the way in which their marital roles have unfolded over time may, in turn, be transferred to their marriages and result in greater conflict and dissatisfaction with the marriage overall.

In contrast, Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz (1992) suggested that delayed couples, who in the current study are better educated and less conservative in terms of gender-role attitudes than those who transitioned to parenthood early, are likely to have been exposed to a more diverse range of “others” for social comparison and are thus more likely to expect and desire a more equitable division of housework than those who made the transition early. In addition, couples who have children later have had more time to experiment with role sharing and more experience negotiating housework before the birth of a first child than parents who have children at younger ages. Hence, as predicted, the delayed couples faring least well maritally (i.e., less marital satisfaction and greater marital conflict) in the study were those for whom their life experiences were incongruent with their current behavior. The delayed, traditional couples, although no different in education and gender-typed attitudes from their delayed, less traditional counterparts, had the greatest disparity in income for husbands and wives, with husbands earning three times their wives' income, on average. In addition, when compared with the delayed, less traditional couples, they had been married a shorter time before the birth of their first child. Hence, even though these couples appeared to be on a less traditional life course trajectory in terms of their later age at first birth, higher education, and its associated liberal gender-typed attitudes, they behaved in a more traditional manner in terms of their earnings and their duration of marriage before the birth of their first child.

These findings underscore the importance of congruence between one's background, beliefs, and behaviors. Couples at risk for lower marital quality during the childrearing years were those for whom these factors were incongruent. Taken together, these findings are particularly salient given the greater variability that exists today in parents' ages at the birth of their first child and the emergence of the dual-earner lifestyle as the modal arrangement for married American couples. With the advent of the dual-earner couple, egalitarian role sharing in marriage has been heralded as advantageous and ideal, particularly for women (Kessler & McRae, 1982; Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983). These findings would suggest, however, that it is important to consider a dual-earner couple's history and life course trajectory before assuming that greater sharing of tasks is necessarily good for marital quality. Although such an arrangement may be associated with positive marital well-being for husbands and wives who become parents later in

life, couples who become parents early and divide tasks more equally may find themselves experiencing greater marital conflict.

In this article, attention has been called to the importance of the timing of the transition to parenthood and its potential impact on marital quality years later. In addition, this work reinforces suggestions made by Luster and Okagaki (1993) underscoring the importance of considering the combined influence of multiple factors when examining the connections between the timing of life course events and family functioning. This study has built upon past work by considering how these factors are associated with marital quality for dual-earner, married couples who have weathered the transition to parenthood and are in the midst of raising two school-aged children. In contrast to Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz's (1992) sample, which was comprised of a mix of husbands and wives in both dual- and single-earner families with firstborn children ranging in age from less than a year to 18 years old, the sample in the current study, small (i.e., $n=180$) relative to their national data set, was comprised of dual-earner couples—all of whom had an eldest child in the fourth or fifth grade. Although this sample does not permit one to generalize the findings to the population at large, it allowed for a focus on how the timing of parenthood and the division of household tasks may be associated with marital quality for couples in which both husbands and wives are employed and in which all couples sampled have been parents for approximately the same amount of time (i.e., 10 years). The cross-sectional nature of the work, however, offers only a snapshot of dynamic family processes. Furthermore, although a strength of the study was the inclusion of both husbands and wives, more research is needed that takes advantage of between- and within-family comparisons in the study of minority families and families facing more challenging economic circumstances than the middle- and working-class families that participated in this study.

This research underscores that “Neither traditional or egalitarian arrangements guarantee nirvana.” (Cowan & Cowan, 1987, p. 170) In the face of rapid demographic changes in family life, what is important for dual-earner couples' marital well-being is the congruence, or match, between their behaviors, beliefs, and backgrounds—not just immediately following the birth of their first child but into the childrearing years as well.

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