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“His” and “Her” Marriage Expectations: Determinants and Consequences

This article uses couple-level data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (N = 2,263) to investigate factors associated with unmarried parents' expectations about marriage and the association between their expectations and subsequent union transitions. In most couples, both partners expect to marry, and their shared expectations are the strongest predictor of marriage and separation following their child's birth. Although men's expectations are somewhat more consequential for union transitions, marriage and relationship stability are more likely when at least one parent expects to marry. Factors such as children from previous relationships, distrust, conflict, and shared activities are also associated with union transitions. Findings about how expectations and other factors relate to marriage and separation may inform new marriage promotion initiatives.

Over 40 years ago, Jessie Bernard observed that a marriage often embodies two distinct views of the relationship: “his” and “hers.” According to Bernard, men and women have different subjective experiences of marriage resulting from gender inequalities in personal relation-

ships and in society as a whole (Bernard, 1972). Since the publication of Bernard's book, marriage and family formation in the United States have changed in important ways. Today, more couples are choosing to cohabit before marriage and to have children outside marriage. Although Bernard's original argument addressed the importance of understanding men's and women's perspectives within marriage, her insights are likely to be relevant for unmarried parents as well. Specifically, whether an unmarried couple marries, stays together, or separates is likely to be determined by both parents' views of their relationship.

In this article, we use newly available data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine unmarried parents' expectations about marriage, and the extent to which these expectations are associated with subsequent union transitions. This study extends previous research on union transitions (e.g., Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Manning & Smock, 1995; Sanchez, Manning, & Smock, 1998; Smock & Manning, 1997) by analyzing data from both partners in a relationship. We also contribute to couple-level research on how partners' perceptions are related to union transitions (Brown, 2000) by examining not only whether partners' expectations matter, but also what factors underlie their views. Finally, we focus on union transitions for couples who are the subject of significant policy interest by analyzing results from a nationally representative survey of unmarried parents in large U.S. cities.

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MARRIAGE EXPECTATIONS AND UNION TRANSITIONS

As Bernard's work suggests, partners' expectations about their future together are important for understanding the trajectory of their relationships. First, expectations themselves are likely to be good predictors of marriage. Sociologists have argued that the ways in which individuals frame, or perceive, a situation have implications for their behavior (Goffman, 1974). Following W. I. Thomas and Robert Merton, we would expect parents' perceptions of reality to be consequential and their predictions of future events to be self-fulfilling if they modify their actions according to their expectations. Empirical evidence on union transitions shows that individuals who report plans to marry their partner (Brown, 2000) or someone else (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992) are more likely to marry than those who do not hold these expectations.

Second, expectations may tell us something about the aspirations of unmarried couples (Walker, 2001). If unmarried parents report that they expect to marry, we might interpret this as a sign that they have adopted culturally mainstream ideas about marriage, rather than adhering to a subculture that rejects the ideal of marriage (e.g., Lewis, 1959). Couples who cannot fulfill their expectations for marriage may face personal or structural obstacles to doing so. Other parents may desire marriage but not see it as an option because they do not view themselves or their partners as good marriage candidates (Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004), or their relationships as sustainable (Waller, 2002).

Finally, expectations may tell us something about how low-income couples perceive the connection between fertility and marriage (e.g., Burton, 1990; East, 1998). For example, couples with high expectations of marrying may view marriage as being closely tied to reproduction, even if it does not precede the child's birth. Alternatively, those who perceive little chance of marriage may have chosen a life course in which marriage is separated temporally and cognitively from reproduction (Luker, 1996).

Knowing whether partners *share* expectations about marriage is also important for understanding the family formation process. If partners frame their futures similarly, they may be better able to achieve this common goal. Conversely, partners who perceive their relationships differently may never have formed an

identity as a couple, or may have begun to separate from each other (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Vaughan, 1986). Partners' views may further diverge during the transition to parenthood, when the *his*, *hers*, and *theirs* of couples' relationships is renegotiated (Cowan & Cowan, 1992).

In a previous couple-level study of how marital expectations influence transitions, Brown (2000) found that when neither partner in a cohabiting union reported plans to marry, not only were couples less likely to marry, they also were more likely to separate. Although partners who share negative expectations about marriage may have chosen to live in informal unions, we believe that marriage is less likely and relationship dissolution is more likely if at least one partner does not believe that the couple will make a formal commitment.

There is also evidence that the association between expectations and marriage may depend on the power differential in the relationship. Some research indicates that cohabiting men have higher expectations about marriage than their partners (Brown, 2000; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991), and that men's expectations carry more weight in regard to marriage, whereas women's assessments have a stronger relationship with separation (Brown). These findings may differ for unmarried couples with children because men's bargaining power may be affected by their lower economic status (Rich, 2001). Although some qualitative research in low-income communities suggests that young fathers can often avoid marriage against the mother's wishes (Anderson, 1989), other research suggests that mothers more often decide to end a relationship with their partner (Edin, 2000; Waller, 2002). The following hypothesis was derived on the basis of this research.

We predict that couples will be more likely to marry and stay together if both or either partner expects to marry. Men's expectations will be more strongly associated with the transition to marriage, whereas women's expectations will be more closely tied to whether the couple stays together.

OTHER PREDICTORS

Each partner brings a set of beliefs and characteristics to the relationship that is likely to affect their future together. In most cases, these beliefs

and characteristics should have consistent effects on marriage expectations and union transitions. Factors such as parents' race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, living arrangements in childhood, age, and having children with other partners are likely to influence how couples frame their expectations regarding marriage, and their ability to marry and maintain stable unions. Race, for example, is strongly associated with marriage, with African Americans having a much lower likelihood of marriage than Whites and Mexican Americans, and higher rates of divorce (Cherlin, 1992; Ellwood & Jencks, 2002). At the same time, researchers have found that African Americans and Mexican Americans are just as likely as Whites to say that they plan to marry (Brown, 2000; Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1993; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991).

We expect parents' race/ethnic status to be more strongly associated with marriage than with expectations about marriage, with Black parents being the least likely to marry and most likely to separate.

Parents should be more likely to marry (and to expect to marry) if they feel economically secure and believe that their partners are good marriage candidates. Both quantitative and qualitative studies have documented a positive relationship between male employment and marriage in lower income communities (Lichter et al., 1992; Sullivan, 1989; Testa, Astone, Krogh, & Neckerman, 1989). Studies of cohabiting couples have found that couples are more likely to marry when the male partner has high earnings (Brown, 2000; Sanchez et al., 1998; Smock & Manning, 1997) and a college degree (Smock & Manning). Similarly, couples have greater odds of marrying (Manning & Smock, 1995) and lower odds of separating (Smock & Manning) when the father is employed full time.

Research and theory on the effects of women's economic status on marriage are mixed, but studies that focused on minority and low-income populations often found that women's education and earnings are just as important as men's in determining whether a couple can *afford* to marry (McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997; Sweeney, 2002).

We predict that both partners' employment and education will be positively associated with marriage expectations and marriage and negatively associated with union dissolution.

The association between age and marriage is also somewhat ambiguous. On one hand, age is typically an indicator of greater emotional maturity and economic resources, which suggests that it would be positively associated with marriage and expectations to marry. Age at marriage is also negatively related to marital dissolution (e.g., Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977). On the other hand, age increases the likelihood that a single woman will have a child by another partner, which reduces a single mother's chances of marriage (Bennett, Bloom, & Miller, 1995; Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003). Men's other children may also reduce their ability to marry. Low-income men who have children from previous relationships may find it difficult to manage competing claims from the mothers of their children, increasing strain on their current relationships and the likelihood of separation. Having a child with another partner could also depress expectations for and transitions to marriage if men shy away from relationships in which they would be required to assume responsibility for other nonbiological children, and if women are reluctant to partner with men who would divert resources to another household (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2003; Mincy, 2002).

We predict that marriage expectations, marriage, and union stability will be positively associated with age and negatively associated with having children with other partners.

The experience of growing up in a household in which parents were married may also affect partners' expectations for marriage and their relationship skills. Couples who model their relationships on those of their parents may form their expectations about marriage and make decisions about union transitions that are consistent with their parents' relationships. Research on newly married couples suggests that couples from nontraditional families are more likely to dissolve their relationship (Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, 1995; Tzeng & Mare, 1995) than couples who lived with both biological parents when growing up. Indeed, a large body of research indicates that people who experience a parental divorce in childhood are themselves more likely to divorce when they are adults (e.g., Amato, 1996; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988).

We expect mothers and fathers who lived with both biological parents to believe that their own chances of marriage are better, and to be more likely to marry and less likely to separate.

Beliefs about gender and about differences between men and women (Epstein, 1988) are likely to reflect parents' experiences both within and outside the relationship, and to have a strong effect on union transitions. In particular, beliefs about the trustworthiness of the opposite gender may emerge from and perpetuate what Furstenberg (2001) called a "culture of gender distrust" (p. 236) in poor communities. According to Furstenberg, women in economically distressed situations often expect men to disappoint them, and therefore regard their partners suspiciously. Aware that they are being watched closely for signs of failure, men lack confidence in their own abilities and have low expectations for success in their relationships.

When women have difficulty trusting men or when both partners have difficulty trusting the other gender, we expect marriage expectations to be lower. We also expect marriage to be less likely and separation to be more likely.

Partners' views of appropriate gendered family roles may also affect their interactions as a couple, and ultimately, their union transitions. Research on cohabiting couples using the National Survey of Families and Households has shown that the odds of marriage are higher, and the odds of separation lower, among women who hold traditional beliefs and who are coupled with egalitarian male partners (Sanchez et al., 1998). In contrast, research on never-married adults (using the same data but with a sample of individuals) has shown that the odds of marriage are higher only for men with traditional views (Sassler & Schoen, 1999).

Although evidence is mixed, we expect couples who hold more traditional views about gendered family roles to have higher expectations of marriage and to be more likely to marry and less likely to separate than couples with less traditional beliefs. Because traditional roles may benefit men more than women, we also expect marriage to be more likely and separation less likely when women hold traditional views.

Other factors, such as conflict between partners, activities together, and cohabitation, can be viewed as shared properties of couples' rela-

tionships. Previous research suggests that conflict tends to increase following the transition to parenthood, leading to lower satisfaction in the relationship (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Researchers have also found that destructive conflict (Hatchett et al., 1995) and negative affect during conflict (Gottman & Levenson, 2000) predict early marital instability. Women have been found to initiate conflict discussions more often than men (Cowan & Cowan) and to feel more comfortable than their male partners handling conflict in the relationship (Gottman, 1994).

We expect parents' perceptions of conflict to be negatively associated with marriage expectations and marriage, and positively associated with union dissolution. Male partners' perceptions of conflict should be more important than female partners' perceptions for union transitions.

Spending time solving a problem and visiting friends represent positive aspects of a relationship. Indeed, when both partners believe that they spend little time together, they are more likely to separate (Brown, 2000). Couples who perceive their interactions together to be positive are less likely to experience marital instability (Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996). Visiting with friends may indicate that partners are integrated into each other's social networks and may signal commitment to the relationship. Prior research suggests that as a couple's relationship grows closer, they are more likely to form mutual friendships, which further strengthens their relationships (Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, & Willetts, 2002).

We expect shared activities to be positively associated with marriage expectations, marriage, and union stability.

The majority of marriages in the United States are now preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Smock, 2000). Previous research has indicated that about three quarters of cohabiting partners in the National Survey of Families and Households report *planning* to marry their partners (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991), and a similar proportion of cohabiting mothers in the National Survey of Family Growth reported *expecting* to marry their partners (Lichter et al., 2004). If couples view cohabitation as a first step toward marriage, moving in together before the birth of

a child may represent a stronger commitment to the relationship than living apart, making early separation less likely.

As such, we expect cohabitation to be positively related to marriage expectations and marriage and negatively related to separation.

METHOD

Data

This analysis draws on information from the two waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey, a birth cohort study of approximately 3,700 unmarried parents and their children. The Fragile Families Study is unique in providing previously unavailable information about the characteristics of unmarried parents and their relationships based on interviews conducted independently with both partners. Data for the Fragile Families Study were collected in 20 U.S. cities, stratified by different labor market conditions and varying welfare and child support policy regimes. When weighted, the sample is representative of all births to unmarried parents in cities with populations over 200,000. Nonmarital births were oversampled at a ratio of approximately three to one. The final sample contains 4,898 births (3,712 nonmarital births and 1,186 marital births). Response rates were 87% for unmarried mothers and 76% for unmarried fathers. Follow-up interviews with both parents were conducted by phone or in person approximately 12–18 months after the birth. Additional follow-up interviews will be conducted when children are ages 3 and 5.

The sample we used for our analyses is restricted to (a) unmarried couples who were romantically involved with one another at the time of the baseline interview (about 83% of the original sample of 3,712 unmarried mothers), (b) couples for whom we had interviews with both mothers and fathers (about 82% of 3,092 couples in romantic relationships), and (c) couples for whom we had information on both dependent variables (89% of couples who met criteria a and b). These restrictions yielded a sample of 2,263 unmarried mothers and fathers. We excluded couples who were no longer romantically involved because less than 3% of these parents reunited to marry (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). Thus, the vast

majority of these parents were not at risk for the transitions on which we focus in this analysis: marriage and union dissolution. As compared with the total sample of unmarried parents in the Fragile Families Study, the parents in our sample are more likely to be living together. They are also more likely to be Black and less likely to be White or Hispanic. Other characteristics, such as their age, education, and living arrangements as children, are similar in both samples.

Expectations and transitions. Our main dependent variable is parents' relationship status at the first follow-up interview. Twelve to 18 months after the birth, about 12% of couples have married, 60% are still in a romantic relationship, and 29% have separated. We also examine the factors associated with parents' marriage expectations, our main independent variable of interest. The marriage expectations variable is based on a question that asked parents (at baseline) whether they perceived "no chance, a little chance, a 50/50 chance, a pretty good chance, or an almost certain chance" of marrying the other parent in the future. Although studies of marriage expectations from the National Survey of Families and Households (e.g., Brown, 2000; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991) looked at reports of marriage plans, in these data, only cohabitators were asked the question about their plans. By using a measure of parents' perceived chances of marriage, we could include all romantic couples in the analysis.

Parents' responses to this question were recoded into a four-category variable to capture their relative expectations: (a) mother reports a high chance of marriage (good or almost certain), father reports a low chance (50/50 or lower); (b) father reports a high chance of marriage, mother reports a low chance; (c) both parents report a high chance; and (d) neither parent reports a high chance. As indicated in Table 1, a high proportion of parents expected to marry at the time of their child's birth, and the majority of parents share this expectation with their partner. In about 61% of the couples, both partners rated their chances of marriage as high, and in 14% of cases, both parents rated their chances as low (50/50 or less). When partners disagreed (25% of all cases), fathers were more likely than mothers to be optimistic about marriage. Specifically, in 16% of cases, fathers were optimistic and mothers were not, and in 9% of the cases, mothers were optimistic and fathers were not.

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR UNMARRIED COUPLES IN THE FRAGILE FAMILIES AND CHILD WELLBEING STUDY ($N = 2,263$)

Variables	M or %
Expectations about marrying partner	
Mother optimistic, father pessimistic	9.2
Father optimistic, mother pessimistic	16.0
Both optimistic	60.9
Neither optimistic	13.9
Union transitions 12–18 months after child's birth	
Married at follow-up	11.7
Romantic relationship at follow-up	59.5
No romantic relationship at follow-up	28.8
Independent	
Both Black	49.5
Both White	10.3
Both Hispanic	24.3
Both other race	00.9
Interracial/interethnic	15.2
Mother's age	23.7
Father older than mother	68.2
One (or both parents) has child with another partner	50.9
Father less than HS	39.1
Father HS degree or GED	37.2
Father more than HS	23.7
Father has more education than mother	24.6
Mother worked last year	68.2
Father employed	76.8
Mother lived with both parents at age 15	36.6
Father lived with both parents at age 15	39.7
Mother reports gender distrust, father does not	20.0
Father reports gender distrust, mother does not	14.3
Both report distrust	08.3
Neither reports distrust	57.4
Mother has traditional gender beliefs, father does not	07.9
Father has traditional gender beliefs, mother does not	26.3
Both have traditional gender beliefs	06.2
Neither has traditional gender beliefs	58.5
Mother reports high conflict, father does not	12.0
Father reports high conflict, mother does not	12.0
Both report high conflict	07.1
Both report low conflict	66.6
Mother reports shared activities	15.0
Father reports shared activities	16.6
Both report shared activities	53.6
Neither reports shared activities	14.8
Cohabiting at birth	63.2

These findings are consistent with research indicating that in most cohabiting relationships, both partners plan to marry (69%), and men are somewhat more likely than women to report plans to marry (12% vs. 7%; Brown, 2000).

Partner and couple characteristics. Categorical variables were used to compare couples in which both partners are White (10%), Hispanic (24%), of another race or ethnic group (1%), or of different race or ethnic groups (15%) to

couples in which both partners are Black (50%). A continuous variable was used to measure mother's age ($M = 24$), and a dichotomous variable indicates the proportion of couples in which the father is older than the mother (68%). We use mothers' reports of the number of children each parent had at the time of the birth and created a dummy variable to indicate whether parents had the same number of children. When couples did not have the same number of children, we assumed that at least one parent had a child by another partner, as is indicated in just over half (51%) of the sample.

Categorical variables were used to compare fathers who have completed high school or a General Equivalency Degree (GED; 37%) and those with education or training beyond high school (24%) with fathers who did not complete high school (39%). We also included a measure of whether the father has more education than the mother (25% of couples). Men's employment was measured with a variable indicating whether the father was employed in the week before the baseline interview at birth. Because mothers were not asked whether they were working the week prior to the birth, the variable measuring women's participation in the work force is based on whether mothers reported earnings in the last year. About 77% of fathers were employed at the time of their child's birth, and about 68% of mothers had worked in the year before the birth. Parents' family backgrounds are represented by dichotomous measures of whether the respondent lived with both biological parents at age 15. Similar proportions of mothers (37%) and fathers (40%) reported living with both parents at this time.

To measure feelings of gender distrust, we used a question that asks mothers whether they believe that men can be trusted to be faithful, and another question that asks whether men are “out to take advantage” of women; fathers were asked identical questions about women. Traditional gender beliefs were measured with a question asking parents whether “the important decisions in the family should be made by the man in the house.” Parents were coded as distrustful or traditional, respectively, if they agreed or strongly agreed with these statements. Because we expected differences between parents' gender beliefs to matter, we created a set of measures indicating whether either, both, or neither partner held these views. In about 57% of couples, both partners appeared to trust the

other gender, whereas in about 8% of cases, both parents reported distrust. Mothers were more likely than fathers to report gender distrust (20% vs. 14%). In the majority of cases (59%), neither partner believed that men should make the important decisions in the household, and surprisingly few couples shared traditional beliefs (6%). When partners disagreed, fathers were more likely than mothers to hold traditional views (26% vs. 8%).

Conflict in the relationship is captured by an index that sums parents' responses to six questions asking how often they argue about money, spending time together, sex, the pregnancy, drinking or drug use, and being faithful—issues expected to be relevant to unmarried parents in low-income communities. We coded parents with scores in the top half of the index as reporting high conflict in the relationship, and created a set of dummy variables that indicate whether either, both, or neither parent perceived their relationship in this way. Approximately two thirds of parents reported relatively low levels of conflict in their relationship, and only about 7% reported high conflict. The same proportion of mothers and fathers (12%) perceived more conflict than their partners. In this analysis, parents were coded as sharing positive activities if they have visited friends and helped each other solve a problem in the last month. We also created variables to indicate whether only the mother (15%), only the father (17%), both (54%), or neither parent (15%) reported having these interactions. In all models, we controlled for whether parents were living together at the time of their child's birth (63%), based on mothers' reports. The remaining couples were romantically involved but living in separate households.

Missing Variables

The number of cases missing on the independent variables ranges from 0 to 8%. For cases with missing data, we recoded the missing values to the sample mean and included a dummy variable to indicate that the case had been recoded. Although this approach to handling missing data is standard in the sociological literature, recent work by Allison (2001) indicated that it may lead to biased estimates. According to Allison, if data are missing completely at random (i.e., if the probability of having missing information is unrelated to the dependent variable of interest), the best approach is to drop

cases with any missing data. Because the data are not likely to be missing at random in our sample, and because dropping cases with any missing data would result in a much smaller sample, we decided to use the former strategy. Results using listwise deletion were consistent with the ones reported in our tables.

A more significant problem of missing data arises because our sample excludes 931 couples in which the father did not participate in the baseline interview. The problem of nonresponse is most notable for fathers who were not living with their child's mother. Whereas 90% of cohabiting fathers completed a baseline interview, only 73% of noncohabiting fathers did so. Although fathers who participated in the baseline interview are no different from other fathers in terms of age, educational, and race/ethnic characteristics, separate analyses suggested that they are different in terms of their commitment to the mothers and children. Because many of the factors associated with selection into our sample were measured directly, such as parents' attitudes, relationship interactions, and cohabitation, bias may not be a large problem. To the extent that bias exists, however, it is most likely to affect the results for union dissolution because couples in noncohabiting relationships are more likely to make this transition.

HIS, HER, AND THEIR EXPECTATIONS

Table 2 presents the results from a multinomial logistic regression model that treats parents' expectations about marriage as the dependent variable. The comparison group includes couples in which neither partner reported more than a 50/50 chance of marriage. The numbers in the first column display coefficients and relative risk ratios associated with both parents saying that their chances of marriage are greater than 50/50—the *theirs* of marriage (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). The next two columns display results associated with only one parent reporting that the chances of marriage are better than 50/50—the *his* and *hers* of marriage. By looking across all three columns, we can identify the variables that are related to increases or decreases in optimism for one or both parents. We see that most of the variables in the model are statistically significant at least at the .05 level for at least one outcome. We indicate where variables are significant at the .10 level because these variables

might have achieved significance with a larger sample.

Shared Optimism

We begin by examining background factors expected to influence parents' joint optimism about marriage as compared with neither parent being optimistic (column 1). Contrary to our hypotheses, White and Hispanic couples are much more likely than Black couples to express joint optimism about marriage. As expected, partners are less likely to share a positive outlook on marriage when they have children from previous relationships. Fathers' education and employment were significant in a model that did not include relationship characteristics or gender beliefs (results not shown), suggesting that fathers' socioeconomic characteristics affect marriage expectations indirectly through couples' attitudes, interactions, and living arrangements.

Factors that are more proximate indices for couples' relationships have a stronger association with parents' joint optimism about marriage. Consistent with our expectations, couples share a less optimistic outlook on their future when the mother or both partners distrust the other gender. In addition, fathers' distrust is strongly associated with couples' expectations. Both partners are more likely to be optimistic when the mother holds more traditional views than her male partner, consistent with our hypotheses. As predicted, relationship-specific characteristics consistently affect parents' shared outlooks on their relationship. When either partner reports high conflict, for example, the risk of both partners having high expectations of marriage is more than 50% lower, and when both partners report high conflict, it is 79% lower. Couples are more optimistic when either or both partners indicate that they participated in shared activities in the last month; the risk of both reporting a good chance of marriage is over 3 times higher when both report sharing activities. The joint expectations of couples who live together are also more than 3 times higher than those of noncohabiting couples.

Relative Optimism

The estimates in columns 2 and 3 allow us to compare couples in which only one partner has high expectations with couples in which both

TABLE 2. RESULTS FROM MULTINOMIAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING UNMARRIED PARENTS’ MARRIAGE EXPECTATIONS AT THE TIME OF THEIR CHILD’S BIRTH (N = 2,263)

Independent Variables	Both Optimistic (vs. Neither Optimistic)		Mother Optimistic (vs. Neither Optimistic)		Father Optimistic (vs. Neither Optimistic)	
	<i>B</i>	<i>e^B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>e^B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>e^B</i>
Background characteristics						
Both White ^a	.84** (.34)	2.32	.08 (.45)	1.08	.09 (.41)	1.09
Both Hispanic	.59** (.21)	1.81	-.14 (.28)	.87	.42† (.23)	1.52
Both other race	-.07 (.84)	.94	-.88 (1.34)	.41	-.31 (.97)	.74
Interracial/interethnic	.34 (.21)	1.40	-.08 (.28)	.92	-.09 (.25)	.91
Mother’s age	-.02 (.01)	.98	.04* (.02)	1.04	.01 (.02)	1.01
Father older	-.23 (.16)	.79	-.25 (.20)	.78	.05 (.18)	1.05
Child with another partner	-.50*** (.15)	.61	-.30 (.20)	.74	-.49** (.18)	.61
Mother lived with both parents at age 15	.13 (.16)	1.14	-.01 (.21)	.99	.05 (.18)	1.05
Father lived with both parents at age 15	.28† (.16)	1.32	.12 (.21)	1.13	.21 (.18)	1.23
Father HS degree or GED ^b	.27 (.18)	1.31	-.32 (.24)	.73	-.05 (.21)	.95
Father more than HS	.30 (.24)	1.34	-.58† (.33)	.56	-.13 (.28)	.88
Father more education than mother	-.14 (.20)	.87	.29 (.27)	1.33	.30 (.23)	1.35
Mother worked last year	.02 (.16)	1.02	.13 (.20)	1.14	.02 (.18)	1.02
Father employed	-.04 (.17)	.96	-.32 (.21)	.73	-.09 (.19)	.92
Gender beliefs						
Mother only reports gender distrust ^c	-.75*** (.19)	.47	-.65** (.26)	.52	.03 (.21)	1.03
Father only reports gender distrust	-.55** (.21)	.58	.10 (.26)	1.11	-.30 (.25)	.74
Both report distrust	-1.15*** (.24)	.32	-.82** (.32)	.44	-.67* (.28)	.51
Mother only traditional gender beliefs ^d	.70* (.32)	2.01	.96** (.39)	2.61	.56 (.36)	1.75
Father only traditional gender beliefs	-.07 (.16)	.93	.07 (.22)	1.07	.05 (.19)	1.05
Both traditional gender beliefs	.44 (.32)	1.56	1.05** (.37)	2.85	.54 (.36)	1.71
Relationship characteristics						
Mother only reports high conflict ^e	-.71*** (.21)	.49	-.45 (.29)	.64	.06 (.23)	1.06
Father only reports high conflict	-.83*** (.20)	.44	-.44† (.26)	.64	-1.05*** (.26)	.35
Both report high conflict	-1.58*** (.25)	.21	-.47 (.29)	.63	-.71** (.26)	.49
Mother only reports shared activities ^f	.39† (.23)	1.48	.93*** (.27)	2.55	.49† (.27)	1.63
Father only reports shared activities	.82*** (.24)	2.27	.47 (.33)	1.59	1.25*** (.26)	3.48
Both report shared activities	1.11*** (.20)	3.04	.73** (.28)	2.07	.79*** (.24)	2.20
Cohabiting at birth	1.17*** (.15)	3.24	.27 (.20)	1.31	.09 (.17)	1.10

Note: *e^B* = exponentiated *B* and is a relative risk ratio. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Results for dummy variables representing missing cases not shown. LR χ^2 (114) = 757.79***.

^aReference group is both Black. ^bReference group is father less than high school. ^cReference group is neither reports distrust. ^dReference group is neither has traditional gender beliefs. ^eReference group is both report low conflict. ^fReference group is neither reports shared activities.

†*p* ≤ .10. **p* ≤ .05. ***p* ≤ .01. ****p* ≤ .001.

partners are pessimistic about marriage. The results for mothers’ expectations in column 2 indicate that mothers are more optimistic than fathers when they are older and when they or both partners report traditional gender beliefs and shared activities. Mothers’ expectations relative to fathers’ are lower when they or both partners report gender distrust. The results in column

3 indicate that fathers’ relative optimism is higher when the father or both partners report that the couple participated in shared activities. Conversely, men’s relative optimism is lower when at least one partner has children from a previous relationship, when both partners report distrust, and when the father or both partners report high conflict in the relationship.

In sum, a number of factors are associated with couples' joint optimism about the future of *their* relationship, including parents' race and ethnicity, having children with another partner, gender distrust, mothers' holding traditional views, conflict, shared activities, and cohabitation. In addition, mother's age, gender distrust, traditional views of gender roles, and shared activities appear to affect *her* optimism relative to *his*, whereas having additional children, conflict, and shared activities appear to influence *his* optimism relative to *hers*. These findings are consistent with previous literature that suggests that men are more sensitive to conflict in relationships, and women to gender distrust.

MARRIAGE AND UNION STABILITY

We next analyze the influence of partners' marriage expectations on their union transitions in the 12–18 months following their child's birth. Table 3 presents the results from a multinomial logistic regression model in which couples' relationship status at the follow-up interview is the dependent variable, and couples' expectations and factors predicting expectations are the independent variables. Models that include measures of partner's joint and relative optimism (columns 2 and 4) allow us to see how outlooks on marriage directly affect relationship transitions and mediate other variables associated with these transitions.

Partners' Background Characteristics and Union Transitions

We begin by examining how parents' backgrounds are related to union transitions. We predicted that Black couples would be less likely to marry and more likely to separate than other couples. In column 1, we see that the risk of marriage is almost twice as high among White couples, over 3 times higher among Hispanic couples, and close to 6 times higher among couples of other race/ethnic groups as compared with Black couples. Hispanic couples are also more likely than Black couples to remain romantically involved even when they do not marry, suggesting the greater fragility of Black couples' relationships (column 3).

As indicated in Table 2, older mothers were more optimistic about marriage at the time of their child's birth. The results in Table 3 show that marriage is indeed more likely than separa-

tion soon after the birth for older mothers. Couples were less optimistic about marriage when one parent had a child with another partner. Twelve to 18 months later, we found that the risk that couples will marry rather than separate is about 29% lower in these cases. It is unclear from our results whether mothers or fathers are more strongly deterred from marrying a partner who has a child from a previous relationship, but couples may be less stable if other mothers have claims on the men's resources. It is also possible that contact with other children increases contact with the former partner, which in turn may give rise to conflict and distrust.

Previous research has shown a positive association between marriage and male partners' education and employment. Although couples were not significantly more hopeful about marriage when fathers had better socioeconomic characteristics, the risk of marrying rather than separating in the year following their child's birth is about 1.7 times higher when fathers have education beyond high school. Education beyond high school may in fact be a better indicator of father's current and future economic stability than simply whether he is employed at the time of the birth, given the poor quality and irregular nature of jobs available to fathers with low human capital. Consistent with some previous research, we find that women's employment, as indicated by earnings, is not associated with a higher likelihood of marriage. The results in column 3, however, show that the risk of staying together is about 1.3 times higher when mothers worked in the year before their child's birth. Our results also show that couples' risk of maintaining a romantic relationship in the first year is about 1.3 times higher when fathers lived with both biological parents at age 15. These background characteristics associated with union stability may also increase couples' likelihood of marriage in the future.

Gender Beliefs and Union Transitions

Parents' beliefs about gender have a weaker association with actual relationship transitions following their child's birth as compared with their expectations about their future together. Gender distrust was associated with significantly lower expectations about marriage, whereas expectations were higher when women had traditional views about gender. Although marriage and staying together is less likely when either or both parents report gender distrust, couples are

TABLE 3. RESULTS FROM MULTINOMIAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING UNMARRIED PARENTS’ UNION TRANSITIONS 12–18 MONTHS AFTER THEIR CHILD’S BIRTH (N = 2,263)

Independent Variables	Married (vs. Separated)				Romantic Relationship (vs. Separated)			
	1		2		3		4	
	B	e ^B	B	e ^B	B	e ^B	B	e ^B
Background characteristics								
Both White ^a	.67** (.27)	1.96	.54* (.27)	1.72	.04 (.20)	1.04	-.02 (.20)	.98
Both Hispanic	1.13*** (.22)	3.09	1.03*** (.22)	2.80	.40** (.15)	1.50	.35* (.15)	1.43
Both other race	1.77* (.89)	5.87	1.79* (.91)	6.02	1.03 (.77)	2.81	1.10 (.78)	2.91
Interracial/interethnic	.30 (.23)	1.34	.21 (.23)	1.23	-.17 (.15)	.84	-.21 (.15)	.81
Mother’s age	.04** (.02)	1.04	.05** (.02)	1.05	.01 (.01)	1.01	.01 (.01)	1.01
Father older than mother	.02 (.17)	1.02	.08 (.18)	1.08	.07 (.11)	1.08	.09 (.11)	1.09
Child with another partner	-.34* (.17)	.71	-.27 (.17)	.76	.09 (.11)	1.09	-.24 (.45)	1.14
Mother lived with both parents at age 15	.25 (.17)	1.28	.22 (.17)	1.25	.17 (.11)	1.19	.16 (.11)	1.17
Father lived with both parents at age 15	-.04 (.17)	.96	-.07 (.17)	.93	.22* (.11)	1.25	.20† (.11)	1.22
Father HS degree or GED ^b	.01 (.21)	1.01	-.07 (.21)	.94	-.11 (.13)	.90	-.13 (.13)	.88
Father more than HS	.53* (.24)	1.69	.42† (.24)	1.52	-.25 (.17)	.78	-.27 (.17)	.76
Father more education than mother	-.20 (.21)	.82	-.16 (.21)	.86	-.05 (.14)	.95	-.03 (.14)	.97
Mother worked last year	.03 (.18)	1.03	.07 (.18)	1.07	.28** (.11)	1.32	.28** (.11)	1.32
Father employed	.11 (.21)	1.11	.10 (.21)	1.10	-.18 (.12)	.84	-.17 (.13)	.84
Gender beliefs								
Mother only reports gender distrust ^c	-.54* (.22)	.58	-.39† (.23)	.68	-.19 (.14)	.83	-.13 (.14)	.88
Father only reports gender distrust	-.06 (.23)	.94	.05 (.23)	1.05	-.18 (.15)	.83	-.13 (.15)	.88
Both report distrust	-.50 (.31)	.61	-.35 (.32)	.71	-.31† (.19)	.73	-.21 (.20)	.81
Mother only traditional gender beliefs ^d	.12 (.30)	1.13	.05 (.30)	1.05	.12 (.20)	1.12	.07 (.20)	1.07
Father only traditional gender beliefs	.09 (.19)	1.10	.13 (.19)	1.13	.19 (.12)	1.20	.19 (.12)	1.20
Both traditional gender beliefs	.34 (.32)	1.41	.33 (.32)	1.39	.06 (.22)	1.10	.01 (.22)	1.01
Relationship characteristics								
Mother only reports high conflict ^e	-.47† (.26)	.63	-.30 (.27)	.74	-.33* (.15)	.72	-.28† (.16)	.76
Father only reports high conflict	-.15 (.24)	.86	-.01 (.25)	.99	-.38** (.15)	.68	-.31* (.16)	.73
Both report high conflict	-.96** (.38)	.38	-.61 (.39)	.54	-.60** (.19)	.55	-.46* (.19)	.63
Mother only reports shared activities ^f	.19 (.30)	1.21	.17 (.31)	1.18	.43* (.18)	1.53	.40* (.18)	1.49
Father only reports shared activities	-.15 (.30)	.86	-.26 (.30)	.77	.27 (.17)	1.31	.19 (.18)	1.20
Both report shared activities	.52* (.25)	1.68	.32 (.26)	1.38	.69*** (.16)	1.99	.59*** (.16)	1.80
Cohabiting at birth	1.13*** (.19)	3.08	.86*** (.19)	2.36	.78*** (.11)	2.18	.68*** (.11)	1.97
Expectations								
Both optimistic ^g	—	—	1.98*** (.38)	7.24	—	—	.77*** (.15)	2.16
Mother optimistic, father not	—	—	.78† (.48)	2.19	—	—	.38† (.20)	1.46
Father optimistic, mother not	—	—	.92* (.43)	2.52	—	—	.50** (.17)	1.65
df	76		82		76		82	
LR χ^2	383.55***		444.83***		383.55***		444.83***	

Note: e^B = exponentiated B and is a relative risk ratio. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Results for dummy variables representing missing cases not shown.

^aReference group is both Black. ^bReference group is father less than high school. ^cReference group is neither reports distrust. ^dReference group is neither has traditional gender beliefs. ^eReference group is both report low conflict. ^fReference group is neither reports shared activities. ^gReference group is neither is optimistic.

†p ≤ .10. *p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001.

significantly less likely to marry only when mothers are more distrustful than their partners, suggesting that women's perceptions have a more direct relationship to transitions. Parents' beliefs about traditional gendered family roles do not appear to directly affect the way that parents' relationships unfold soon after the birth.

Relationship Characteristics and Union Transitions

In addition to affecting couples' optimism about their future, the characteristics of parents' relationships are associated with union transitions as shown in Table 3. Consistent with parents' expectations and our hypotheses, when both partners indicate frequent arguments in the relationship, the risk of marrying is about 62% lower, and the risk of maintaining a romantic union is about 45% lower. The likelihood of couples staying together is also lower when either partner reports a high level of conflict, suggesting that female parents may be as sensitive to conflict as their male partners in regard to maintaining their relationship. The risk of couples marrying is about 1.7 times higher, and the risk of staying together is almost twice as high, if both partners report shared activities in comparison with partners who do not. Couples are also more likely to stay together if only the mother perceives that they are sharing activities together.

Parents who were living together at the time of the birth had higher joint expectations that they would marry, and these expectations seem to have been well founded. The risk of marriage (versus separation) in the first year is more than 3 times higher, and the risk of staying together (versus separation) is more than twice as high, for cohabitators as compared with noncohabitators. Living together may be associated with a greater likelihood of marriage and greater union stability in the first year either because parents select into cohabitation, or because the experience of living together makes them more committed to the relationship (Osborne, 2004).

The Role of Expectations

The results in Table 3 indicate that most of the factors that influenced couples' marriage expectations also influenced early transitions. When marriage expectations are added to the model in columns 2 and 4, we see that the way parents

frame their future together is in fact the best predictor of whether they will marry or stay together after having a child. Couples' expectations for the future have the largest impact when they are shared by both partners; couples are about 7.2 times more likely to marry and 2.2 times more likely to stay together if both partners are optimistic about marrying in the future. One parent's optimism, however, is enough to significantly encourage marriage and romantic union stability.

Consistent with previous research, our results suggest that for marriage, male partners' expectations are more consequential than female partners'. We also find a significant association between fathers' expectations and maintaining a romantic relationship. At the same time, the risk of marrying is also more than 2 times higher and the risk of staying together is at least 1.5 times higher when the mother is optimistic about marriage. These findings support our hypothesis that parents are more likely to stay together following the birth of a child if at least one partner foresees the possibility of marriage.

We also see that marriage expectations partially mediate several variables associated with relationship transitions, particularly proximate indicators of parents' relationships. The positive association of fathers' education and sharing activities becomes less significant for union transitions when parents' expectations are taken into account, suggesting that these factors are at least partly filtered through parents' perceptions. Moreover, the negative association of having a child from a previous relationship, mothers' feelings of distrust, and either or both parents perceiving high conflict in the relationship are reduced when expectations are included in the model. Other variables are both directly and indirectly related to marriage and union stability following a nonmarital birth. Notably, Hispanic and cohabiting couples are significantly more likely than other couples to marry and to stay together even after their more optimistic outlooks are taken into account.

CONCLUSION

During a time when divorce was changing the structure of American families, Bernard (1972) called on social scientists to examine the perspectives of both partners in a marriage. With more families now formed outside marriage, we investigated how the perceptions of unmarried

partners were related to the trajectory of their relationships. We extend previous research on union transitions by examining how both partners' perceptions are related to marriage and separation, using a larger, more diverse sample that includes both cohabiting and noncohabiting couples. In addition, we identify how factors such as race and ethnicity, children from other partnerships, beliefs about gender, and relationship quality underlie couples' marriage expectations that in turn influence early union transitions.

We find that couples' expectations about their future together are the strongest predictors of whether they will marry soon after their child's birth. Consistent with previous research on cohabiting couples (Brown, 2000), unmarried parents typically expect to marry; when partners disagree, men tend to be more optimistic than women. Couples are most likely to realize their expectations and maintain their relationships when they frame their futures similarly, or when *his* and *her* positive expectations for the relationship converge. Our findings also lend support to the hypothesis that unmarried fathers' perceptions may be more important than those of mothers for marriage, although couples are more likely to marry and stay together when either parent has high expectations.

With one out of three births occurring to unmarried parents, many of whom are of low socioeconomic status (Ventura & Bachrach, 2000), new welfare policies are aimed at encouraging marriage among unmarried couples. Our findings suggest that unmarried parents may be most interested in receiving support as a couple soon after their child's birth, when they are optimistic about their future together. The results also indicate that fathers' perspectives are particularly important for relationship trajectories. Consequently, programs may be most effective if they make an effort to include fathers and to work with couples. Because cohabitators are much more likely to marry and stay together, programs may also want to consider targeting couples who have already made a commitment to live together.

Our results also have implications for specific program initiatives. Unmarried parents in our study appear to value marriage and expect it to follow reproduction, but their hopes for the future are not always realized. As such, promoting the value of marriage may be less critical than understanding and addressing the factors

that encourage and discourage couples from having a future together. Programs that focus on relationship skills training should recognize that multiple partner fertility, women's distrust of men, high levels of conflict, and the absence of shared activities may present barriers to couples' relationships, making them less hopeful about marriage and less likely to marry. Conversely, couples are more likely to marry in the first 12–18 months after their child's birth when fathers have higher human capital, and are less likely to separate when mothers are employed, indicating the potential importance of education and employment programs for these parents.

The results described here are for union transitions 12–18 months after the child's birth. Although the proportion of couples who marry may seem low given their initial optimism, more couples will experience union transitions after this time. Because unmarried parents face multiple barriers to marriage and relationship stability, far fewer couples are likely to marry than expected, and more are likely to separate. It will be important to use longitudinal data to track these relationships over time and to identify the factors that help and hinder couples in realizing their early expectations for the future.

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