

How Do Disadvantaged Parents View Tensions in Their Relationships? Insights for Relationship Longevity Among At-Risk Couples*

Maureen R. Waller**

Abstract: Drawing on longitudinal, qualitative interviews with parents in the Fragile Families Study, this paper examines the narrative frames through which partners in stable and unstable unions viewed tensions over economic issues, domestic responsibilities, personal problems, communication, trust, and their family and social networks. These interviews suggest that parents in stable unions framed tensions as manageable within the context of a relationship they perceived to be moving forward, whereas those in unstable unions viewed tensions as intolerable in relationships they considered volatile. Three years later, parents' narrative frames generally guided their decisions about maintaining or dissolving relationship, but some parents changed their interpretations in response to unexpected positive or negative events, with important implications for union longevity.

Key Words: at-risk families, couple narratives, family stress and conflict, fragile families, union stability.

Given the instability of many cohabiting and marital unions in the U.S. today, scholars in several fields have been interested in understanding why some relationships are more likely to endure than others. Although a large, interdisciplinary literature has identified individual, relationship, and socioeconomic factors associated with couples' decisions to divorce or delay marriage, these factors only appear to tell part of the story about why relationships have changed dramatically in recent years (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004). Some researchers have pointed to the importance of understanding partners' subjective perceptions of their relationships in addition to the objective correlates of union transitions, noting that these explanations do not always converge (Amato & Previti, 2003; Surra & Gray, 2000).

Previous studies have examined partners' perceptions of significant stages of their relationships, such as courtship, cohabitation, the first years of marriage, the transition to parenthood, and divorce

(e.g., Chadiha, Veroff, & Leber, 1998; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004; Sessler, 2004; Surra & Hughes, 1997; Vaughan, 1986). Although this literature provides important insights into marital expectations and transitions, couples today are forming and dissolving enduring relationships in diverse types of unions, many of which involve children. More than one out of three births now occurs to unmarried parents and about one quarter of these births are to women who are living with their partners (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). The majority of parents who are unmarried when they have a child later marry their child's other parent or another partner (Graefe & Lichter, 2002). However, couples who are cohabiting at their child's birth and those who marry following a nonmarital birth tend to be more economically disadvantaged than those represented in previous studies and are disproportionately African American and Latino. Although couples who have followed a less traditional path to

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**Maureen R. Waller is an assistant professor in the Department of Policy Analysis & Management, 257 MVR Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853 (mrw37@cornell.edu).

family formation have received increasing policy attention in recent years because of their fragility, we have limited information about how they view some of the factors that enable and constrain relationship longevity (Fein & Ooms, 2006).

This study fills an important gap in the literature by using a unique set of longitudinal, qualitative interviews with mothers and fathers who participated in the Fragile Families Study to examine how a diverse sample of cohabiting and married parents who had a nonmarital birth interpreted tensions in their relationship or issues that parents identified as causing stress or conflict between them. Specifically, this study had two aims. The first aim was to distinguish between how parents in stable unions, or those unions that remained intact during the study, and parents in unstable unions, or those that dissolved during this time, interpreted tensions in the early stages of their relationships. Therefore, the first stage of the analysis draws on interviews conducted with parents 1 year after having a child together to investigate how parents in stable and unstable unions perceived these tensions through a narrative frame (Small, 2002), or filter, that made them seem more or less tolerable. The second aim of the study was to examine the stability of parents' interpretations during the early years of their child's life and to investigate how these interpretations were related to union longevity. As such, the second stage of the analysis drew on longitudinal information from interviews with parents when their focal child was age four to examine the conditions under which they maintained or changed narrative frames and how these interpretations guided parents' decisions about their relationships.

The Risk of Dissolution in Contemporary Unions

Demographic trends in marriage and family formation point to a recent separation of reproduction and marriage in economically disadvantaged communities. Ellwood and Jencks (2004) observed that as women with higher educational levels delayed marriage and childbearing, women with less education delayed marriage only, leading to a higher proportion of births outside of marriage. These changes have disproportionately affected African American families but have also occurred in Latino and White families (Ellwood & Jencks).

Recent data also show a growing proportion of nonmarital births occur to two-parent, cohabiting

couples (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), but cohabiting relationships tend to be short lived for disadvantaged couples because they neither dissolve nor transition to marriage (Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006). Although marriages are typically more stable than cohabiting unions, the relationships of disadvantaged women who have a nonmarital birth prior to marrying are also quite fragile (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004). Research indicates that about 29% of women who had a previous nonmarital birth dissolve their marriages within 5 years, and they are more than twice as likely to divorce during this time as other women (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). As with the incidence of nonmarital childbearing, the likelihood of divorce also differs substantially by education and race, with non-Hispanic White women and those at higher educational levels having a lower risk of dissolution (Ellwood & Jencks).

Perceptions of Relationship Formation and Dissolution

Although the demographic literature indicates that disadvantaged couples in nontraditional unions experience greater challenges to relationship longevity, we have limited information about how they perceive relationship formation and dissolution (Fein & Ooms, 2006). In an important body of research that analyzes the accounts of more advantaged couples during courtship, Catherine Surra (e.g., Surra & Gray, 2000; Surra & Hughes, 1997) identified two general types of commitment processes prior to marriage. In particular, she found that partners with "relationship-driven" commitments attributed steady progression in their relationship to such things as their interactions as a couple and positive beliefs about the relationship, whereas those in "event-driven" commitments associated the volatility of their relationships with conflict and negative relationship beliefs. Couples were also differentiated by their social networks, trust, and compatibility as partners.

In addition to these psychological studies of close relationships, sociologists have examined how partners' explanations of union longevity and dissolution reflect culturally shared meanings about enduring unions (Arendell, 1995; Reissman, 1990; Swidler, 2001). This literature suggests that partners' interpretations of the success or failure of their relationship are drawn from an accessible repertoire of accounts that allows them to make sense of their experiences and to justify their behavior (Reissman;

Swidler). For example, Swidler argued that two of the primary ways of talking about enduring unions in contemporary, American culture—as either a voluntary choice or as a binding commitment—have roots in expressive individualism and religious traditions. Similarly, Illouz (1997) described a “realist” model of relationships informed by therapeutic and economic discourses that suggest that love develops over time from a process of information gathering and “work” on the relationship, and a more romantic “idealist” model that represents love as an “all consuming force.” These authors do not suggest that a particular model of enduring relationships is associated with union stability but rather focus on how partners draw from a variety of models to assess their own relationships and communicate a desire to maintain them.

Although the narratives, or story-like explanations, partners tell about their relationships make sense within a larger culture framework, they may also help partners construct a shared identity that distinguishes them from other couples (Orbuch, 1997; Somers, 1994). Berger and Kellner (1964) described marriage as a process by which partners negotiate a common understanding of their relationship and its meaning in their lives. Because each partner brings their own expectations and ideas about marriage to the relationship, these perspectives must be calibrated with those of their partner for the relationship to endure (Chadiha et al., 1998). When partners “uncouple,” Vaughan (1986) suggested that they reverse this process by developing independent identities and understandings of the relationship and reconstructing the history of their relationship in a negative light.

Narrative frames approach. Narrative frames may be thought of as the cultural categories through which partners’ perceptions of the relationship are filtered, highlighting some aspects of their experiences over others, and that make sense within the ongoing narratives they tell about their relationships (Small, 2002). Narrative frames operate as mechanisms that make some outcomes more possible or likely than others. They are also dynamic because they emerge from ongoing processes of interaction (Benford & Snow, 2000; Small; Tannen, 1993). For example, frames may embody expectations about the future that are based on previous experiences that are then used to spare people “the trouble of figuring things out anew” in subsequent experiences (Tannen, pp. 20–21). Although narrative frames are likely to be reproduced if these expectations continue to be

met (Tannen, p. 17), “momentary crises” may make it more difficult for people to sustain an ongoing narrative, and they may shift frames to make sense of these new developments (Small). Documenting how partners frame tensions they are facing, and the conditions under which these frames change, may tell us how parents in fragile relationships interpret important experiences in the years after having a child together and how these interpretations influence the longevity of their relationships.

Method

Sample

This analysis draws on two waves of in-depth, qualitative interviews I conducted with new mothers and fathers when their child was about 1 and 4 years old. The participants in this qualitative study were randomly selected from a larger sample of parents who participated in one site of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. The Fragile Families Study was designed to be representative of parents who had a nonmarital birth in large cities and to include a comparison group of married parents who had children at the same time and in the same hospitals (see Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). To select participants for the qualitative subsample, I stratified the Fragile Families sample in one site by the three largest race/ethnic groups (i.e., non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic of Mexican descent, and non-Hispanic White) and selected a proportionate (10%) sample of 62 parents within these strata. About 86% of mothers and 88% of fathers selected for the qualitative subsample agreed to participate in the first interview in 1998 – 1999. As in the survey, mothers in this study were more likely to participate in the follow-up interview (85%) than fathers (70%). Both the survey and the qualitative study were also more successful at retaining fathers in romantic relationships with their child’s mother, producing a somewhat select sample of fathers. In this study, the higher attrition of fathers means that the analysis relied more heavily on women’s reports of relationship dissolution at the second interview.

The analysis focused on parents who were living with or married to each other at the time of their child’s birth and who were both interviewed in the first wave. The married sample was further limited

to couples in which at least one parent had a previous nonmarital birth (either with their child's other parent or a different partner) to increase the comparability of couples in the analysis. After making these restrictions, the sample used in the analysis included 44 parents (22 couples). Descriptive statistics at the time of the child's birth show that about one third of these couples were married and two thirds were cohabiting. Couples had been together over 4 years at the time of their child's birth, and couples who were still together at the follow-up interview had been together over 8 years on average. The mean age for mothers was 25 and for fathers was 29. Couples were disproportionately African American (36%) or Latino (36%), with a smaller number of mixed race/ethnic (23%) and White (5%) couples. They tended to be of low socioeconomic status, with over three fourths of parents reporting they did not have education beyond high school, 36% of fathers reporting they were unemployed, and 50% of couples reporting household incomes below the poverty line. About 59% of mothers and 55% of fathers had children with other partners.

The first 4 years after having a new child is a critical time to examine relationship stability because many parents who have a nonmarital birth dissolve their relationships during this time (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). In the analysis, parents in stable unions ($n = 12$), or those relationships that remained intact during the study, were compared to those in unstable unions ($n = 10$), or those that dissolved by the follow-up interview. A comparison of parents in these unions showed that couples who ended their relationships by the follow-up interview were more likely to be cohabiting, to be younger, and to be African American or of mixed race or ethnicity than those who stayed together.

Interviews

The study used semistructured interviews following a "tree and branch" design (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This type of interview focuses on the same set of topics across interviews but is conducted as a "guided conversation" to facilitate rapport, to elicit open-ended, "information-rich" responses (Weiss, 1994), and to allow new information to emerge during the interview. Interviewed mothers and fathers separately in order to encourage them to be forthcoming about these issues. Most interviews took place in parents' homes and lasted about 90 min at each of

the two interviews (180 min total). Parents were compensated \$50 for participating in each interview.

Analytic Strategy

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. I used Atlas ti to facilitate the three basic steps of qualitative data analysis: coding the data, writing analytical memos, and creating visual displays (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994; Weiss, 1994). I began the analysis with line-by-line coding or labeling each line of data using the open coding tool in Atlas (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding in this analysis focused on two sections of the interview where (a) parents were asked to discuss conflict and other sources of strain in the relationship as well as what could be done to alleviate these tensions and (b) parents were asked to recount the story of how they met and any changes in their relationship since this time. The analysis then proceeded to more focused, analytic coding to identify the main types of tensions in the relationship and common relationship trajectories (Charmaz, 2001). As part of the process of focused coding, I grouped open codes into Atlas "code families," or codes related to different types of tensions and trajectories. Codes for the analysis were generally developed inductively. I also used some sensitizing concepts to code relationship trajectories (Surra & Hughes, 1997), changes in interpretive frames (Reissman, 1990), and models of enduring unions, such as commitment and choice (Swidler, 2001).

The Atlas query tool was used to sort text associated with the code families by the responses of parents in stable unions and unstable unions. I also displayed a reduced form of these data in a matrix (row and column) format (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and analyzed the sorted responses of stable and unstable couples in memos through a process known as local integration (Weiss, 1994). The last stage of the analysis involved inclusive integration (Weiss) in which themes identified in the process of local integration were brought together around the core concept of parents' tolerance of relationship tensions (LaRossa, 2005). Techniques such as my prolonged engagement in the field collecting the longitudinal data and negative case analysis (checking responses that did not fit within the core concept) were used to promote the trustworthiness of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Longitudinal data from both partners made it possible to

triangulate parents' responses across both interviews as well as to compare mothers' and fathers' responses. An independent coder was also used to check the reliability of the primary codes used to categorize relationship tensions, frames, and trajectories and coded 91% of parents' responses similarly.

Findings

The analysis began by examining information from the first wave of interviews to investigate how parents talked about the issues that were the focus of tensions in their relationships. Although these results showed that parents identified similar tensions in regard to their economic and housing situations, the division of child care and housework, and personal problems with one of the partners, parents in unstable relationships talked about additional tensions over communication, trust, and interference from their social networks—issues more often considered strengths among parents in stable relationships. Highlighting several interacting sources of conflict led parents in unstable unions to problematize the tensions they were experiencing rather than viewing them as manageable. The way parents framed these tensions can also be understood within the narratives they told about their relationships, in which parents in stable relationships focused on progress and growth and parents in unstable unions emphasized volatility and uncertainty in their relationships.

Relationship Tensions: Similarities Between Couples

Economic and housing issues. In over 70% of stable and unstable unions, at least one parent referred to economic issues, like their employment, income, or housing circumstances, as a focus of tensions in their relationship in the first year. For example, Al, an African American father of two said: "I think the only thing that really bears down on my relationship at times is our financial problems . . . that's the only thing that really causes friction." Parents said that their disagreements often revolved around the daily stress of meeting the family's economic needs when one or both partners earned low wages, worked long hours, or were unable to secure full-time work. Employment problems appeared to be a particular concern for men who had a history of incarceration or who were undocumented. Families in this study also lived in one of the most expensive housing

markets in the country and identified their inability to secure housing as a significant source of stress on their relationships, especially when they lived in temporary or crowded housing situations. As Leticia, a Latina mother of two who experienced conflicts with her partner over not being able to set up an independent residence with him explained, "I don't earn enough for an apartment . . . I applied for Section 8, and they say years and years it takes."

Household and childcare issues. In the first year after having a new baby, another common tension parents talked about was over the division of household and childcare responsibilities, an issue mentioned in over half of stable and unstable unions. Stephanie, a first-time Latina mother observed, "Now that we have a baby, it's a little rougher. I mean, we'll argue at night over who's going to wake up and take the baby." Tensions over child care not only centered on mothers' concerns that fathers were less involved with their new child but also on concerns that men were less involved in coparenting older children, including those from a previous relationship. Besides holding different expectations about how men and women should share these responsibilities, parents suggested that having additional biological or stepchildren could tax their emotional and physical reserves to accomplish other domestic tasks. According to Mary, a White mother of three, tensions over housework emerged frequently, "because the house is so small, it gets dirty really fast [with three children]. The kids won't pick up their toys, and you know, things like that." Frank, her partner agreed that most of their arguments revolved around the division of domestic responsibilities since having a third child, "If you ever hear us arguing, there's a 99.9% chance it's over laundry."

Personal problems. Finally, in more than half of stable and unstable unions, parents pointed to personal problems of one or both partners that led to tensions in their relationships. Bob, an African American father of three who was himself a recovering drug user said: "Right now it's almost on a daily basis [we have] some type of argument. But see, when a person's on crack, that is priority one. Everything else is secondary." The personal problems parents mentioned ranged from negative personality traits to incarceration, criminal behavior, and substance-use problems. Although some women also identified their partner's violent behavior as a personal problem, this issue was typically raised at the follow-up interview as described later.

Relationship Tensions: Differences Between Couples

Communication issues. There were also some important differences in the tensions parents in stable and unstable unions identified. In addition to the everyday stresses and strains that many couples experienced in their relationship after having a new baby, almost twice as many parents in unstable as stable unions talked about general tensions related to communication (60% vs. 33%)—a catchall term parents used to refer to problems such as being open, honest, understanding, and patient with each other. This concern was expressed by Becky, a Latino mother of two, who commented: “Instead of snapping on each other . . . I think if we was both a little more patient, I think it would be better.” In contrast, parents in stable unions often characterized their ability to communicate as one of the primary assets of their relationship. When describing the strengths of his relationship, Howard, like other parents in stable unions said: “We’re able to talk to each other. Sometimes we may get a little testy, but we can talk.”

Trust and fidelity issues. Those parents who would later dissolve their relationships also mentioned tensions over trust and fidelity more than twice as often as parents in stable unions (70% vs. 33%). As Cornelia, a Latina mother of two, observed, “We don’t know how to trust each other, and we got a lot of he said/she said interactions going between us. A lot of conflicts.” In the first year, these tensions seemed to arise less over actual cases of infidelity than feelings that their partner was giving too much time or attention to someone of the opposite gender. Parents’ past romantic involvements, including with the parents of their older children, could also generate distrust if they worried their partner might return to this relationship. Although parents in stable unions were certainly not immune from these kinds of concerns, they more often characterized distrust as something they were able to move beyond rather than as an ongoing issue.

Family and social network issues. Tensions related to parents’ family and social networks often arose because couples in this study lived in close proximity to friends and family, sometimes relying on them for help with child care and housing. Although family and social networks were an important source of support for many couples in the study, nearly double the number of parents in unstable relationships as stable unions also talked about their social networks as an unwelcome source of interference

(60% vs. 33%). Similar to other parents, Jaime, a Latino father of two, suggested that family members were trying to sabotage the relationship by raising issues about his character and behavior: “[Her cousins are] trying to put stuff in her head. Trying to tell her I’m not good and I be trying to get other girls . . . Some people don’t want us to be together.” Spending too much time with friends could also mean partners engaged in risky behaviors or had less time to devote to their children.

In addition to experiencing more tensions over communication, trust, and family/social networks, partners in unstable unions less often agreed about which tensions were salient. Partners in unstable unions were least likely to agree that personal problems, household/childcare issues, and communication presented serious problems, with women expressing particular concern about men’s participation in child care and personal behavior.

Interpretations of Tensions

Tolerance of tensions. From an outside perspective, stable and unstable couples faced many of the same kind of objective risks to relationship stability in the first year of the study (Surra & Gray, 2000). However, by framing these issues in a particular way, parents viewed the tensions they were experiencing through somewhat different lenses. As these accounts suggest, parents in unstable unions did not simply identify more problems in their relationships but also perceived these tensions as reinforcing each other, making them less tolerable. For example, parents perceived tensions from their social networks to stem from their economic reliance on family members and to fuel feelings of distrust between them. Similarly, parents felt issues around communication and trust made it more difficult to resolve many other problems.

Because parents in unstable unions perceived several interacting sources of tensions in their relationships, partners typically identified changes within their relationships, their external circumstances, and in their partner that would be needed to overcome these challenges. As a result, parents in unstable relationships tended to frame the tensions they were experiencing as problematic and intractable, an interpretation expressed by at least one parent in four out of five of these unions. In contrast, parents in stable unions tended to identify a limited set of problems

that were straining their relationships and thought that changes in one area, such as their economic situation, would go a long way toward alleviating these tensions. As such, parents in stable unions framed the tensions they were experiencing as both more manageable and amenable to change, a view held by at least one parent in all of these unions.

The accounts of two young African American couples with similar socioeconomic risks to relationship stability illustrate how tensions that were considered intolerable in one situation were viewed as manageable in another. In the first year of the study, both couples lived with family members because they were unable to afford their own apartment. An observer might note that both men had been incarcerated and were currently unemployed and both women had a teen birth with another partner and were currently receiving assistance. Parents in both couples also mentioned issues around negotiating the father's time with their children and around trust.

Although economic problems were identified by partners in both couples as the major source of tension in their relationships, they framed this situation differently. Like other stable couples, Renee and James talked about overcoming some initial trust issues, being able to communicate about their expectations for dividing child care, and having the support of their extended families. Renee explained: "He's coming out to be a great father . . . I trust him a lot . . . My mom likes him a lot . . . We get along real well. We might argue, but we'll sit down, talk it over." Although Renee and James had recently moved back in with her mother after their apartment building was condemned, they both framed tensions over their economic situation as manageable and identified some external changes that would help. James said, "I just wish I had a steady job. But I'm happy right now." Renee shared this perspective:

The best thing for us would be that James would find a good paying job, and they would be willing to help us out so everybody has the benefits . . . It would be easier for me to get a job, if I go back to school . . . There's a lot of jobs out there, but it's like you gotta have a lot of things in order to get that job, like a high school diploma or GED.

In the 6 years Tina and Michael had been together, they had also moved several times, most

recently from a motel into a public housing complex, where they were living temporarily with Michael's sister. Michael said an improvement in their financial situation "would take a lot of stress off of her." Tina agreed that these financial issues had strained their relationship but also pointed to an unequal division of child care, his financial irresponsibility, his friends' negative influence, and clashes with her family over Michael's behavior.

I take my marriage vows very seriously, but there's times when I really do want to give up because certain things are just unbelievable . . . His attitude. Just being the only one who's paying for everything, or the only one who's watching the kids . . . Always having to understand what he's going through. When are you going to understand what I'm going through? . . . Because when he gets money, he leaves and goes hanging out with his friends . . . As far as my family is concerned, sometimes I have to choose.

Like parents in other unstable relationships, Tina problematized their economic situation and said that a series of changes that would need to take place to ease these tensions, such as Michael, "growing up," trying harder to obtain a job, and finding different friends.

Relationship contexts. When asked to describe the history of their relationships at the first interview, parents in stable unions typically presented their relationship as being on a positive trajectory. They also emphasized progress that had occurred in recent years, sometimes after a major test of the relationship. In these accounts, parents referred to models of enduring unions that are available to them from culture (Swidler, 2001). In particular, progress was presented either as the result of natural growth because they had chosen the right partner or as a result of "working" on the relationship out of a commitment to their partner.

For couples like Arthur and Jane, selecting a partner with whom they could have a "healthy" rather than an "addictive" relationship helped explain why they had "grown closer" following an unexpected pregnancy and expected the relationship to be "better and stronger" in the future. Both former drug addicts, Jane, a White mother of two, attributed her progress with Arthur to the fact that: "We had both been in bad real

relationships in the past” and consciously chose a relationship that was free of drugs and violence. Arthur also explained the progression of their relationship in regard to choosing a compatible partner:

I liked Jane’s company, we got along, she’s real mellow and mature . . . So it’s like we just kind of jived together on a lot of levels. And then one day she said “I got something to tell you. I’m pregnant”. . . . I could just tell down here it was going to be okay. . . . I felt like I could probably stay for a long time. I didn’t see any major changes occurring or it wasn’t like she had any character defects that really bothered me that I was going to have to like shut my eyes to . . . On a deeper level, I think we’ve grown closer.

Other parents, like Lucia and Maxwell, said that growth was possible within their relationship because they were committed to working on their problems. In particular, this couple pointed to personal changes they had made following the transition to parenthood, when emotional intimacy and the division of child care became points of contention. As Lucia, a Latina mother of two, observed, “Actually, he has changed a lot, [and] I changed too . . . It’s really hard to imagine being without him.” Similarly, Maxwell said:

Our relationship is better as we go along. I try to understand her and she tries to understand me. I guess the first three years were difficult with a new child . . . and I just took it upon myself that I had to change, and I told her that she had to change, too. It wasn’t just me. And ever since then, it’s been better . . . I can’t imagine myself being single, and having my wife and my kids elsewhere.

In stories about their relationship trajectories, these partners constructed a positive identity as a couple who chose a healthy relationship on the one hand or were committed to make the relationship work on the other. They also suggested the alternative to doing so would be worse for them as individuals or unimaginable. Given the instability of other relationships around them, having a relationship that they perceived as moving forward also

made many couples feel better off in comparison. In the last section, we saw that Renee and James viewed the economic tensions in their relationship as tolerable. This frame can also be interpreted in light of the story both partners told about their relationship, which emphasized receiving recognition from their family and friends as a young couple who could make it against the odds. Their identity as a successful couple also conferred a special status on them and set them apart from their peers. Renee told me: “My mom says, I think you guys can make it. Y’all be a happy couple . . . And I’m gonna stick with him as long as he can stick with me. Like butter on rice.” According to James, “All my friends look at me like, I don’t see how you do it. Hey man, I’m just trying to make this work right here. ‘Cause none of their relationships gonna be successful.”

In contrast to these accounts of partners in stable unions, other partners assessed the trajectory of relationship differently or had mutual concerns about the course it was taking in the first year. If growth and progress were the dominant themes in the accounts of parents who stayed together during the study, volatility and uncertainty were emphasized by parents who dissolved their relationship by the second interview. Similar to other partners in unstable unions, Marie, an African American mother of two, said her relationship had been “up and down” without any clear sense of progress: “All marriages are not sunshine and roses every day. But it’s not hell either. So you pray on those days that get hard . . . and then on the days that it’s sunshine and roses, you just smile on those days.” Although parents in stable and unstable unions drew on some similar models of enduring unions, parents in unstable relationships more often referred to ideas of commitment and choice to understand why their relationship was not advancing and to imagine alternative scenarios where it would be more likely to work.

Like many couples, Jim and Lauren viewed an unexpected pregnancy as a turning point in their relationship. In this case, however, they sought counseling about whether to continue the pregnancy because both had children from previous relationships and did not want another child. Although the birth of their child temporarily brought them closer, Jim felt they did not continue to grow as a couple because they never consciously chose to move in together or made a commitment to being in a long-term relationship.

To me, it didn't happen right. There was never a commitment . . . The timing was bad, the relationship was not good. She was into breaking up with me anyway . . . We still have good days and bad days. . . . Personally, deep inside me, I don't think anything's been resolved . . . So from one day to another, I'm really not sure. And I cannot build or plan our future based on that.

Unstable couples like Lauren and Jim had typically separated one or more times before their child's birth. When parents could not account for their relationship trajectory, they were less hopeful about their future together. Lauren explained: "All of a sudden one day, we just ended up in a relationship together. So I don't know how it happened . . . In the future I really can't say [what will happen], because it's been so up and down."

Unlike couples that stayed together in the years after their child's birth, couples who would later separate did not typically receive special recognition or encouragement for their relationships nor did they feel better off than their peers. In fact, the additional tensions they identified over trust and their social networks tended to put their problems on display and involve other people who questioned their compatibility or commitment. Partners in unstable unions also failed to construct a private identity as a successful couple and even had difficulty identifying positive characteristics of the relationship, saying things like: "That should be easy, right?" and "I can't think of too many things." Similarly, when asked to talk about the positive qualities of their partners, partners in unstable unions had trouble doing so, more often highlighting their performance as parents: "He's the type of person that's scared to have a commitment . . . [but] he's there for them."

Stability of Interpretations at Year 4

Previous research suggests that the narrative frames parents used to describe tensions in their relationship at the first interview would shape their expectations about the future and that parents would reproduce these frames in subsequent years if their expectations continued to be met (Tannen, 1993). Information from the follow-up interviews made it possible to examine the stability of these narrative frames over the next 3 years and the conditions in which parents reproduced or changed their

interpretations. Longitudinal data also showed how these later frames guided parents' decisions about maintaining or dissolving their unions. The follow-up interviews suggested that parents in stable unions typically continued to view tensions as manageable within a relationship that was perceived to be on a positive trajectory, even after additional issues emerged, and parents in unstable unions continued to describe tensions as problematic within the context of a volatile relationship. However, in about one third of couples, at least one parent changed frames at the follow-up interview to account for unexpected positive or negative events that altered their basic understanding of the relationship.

Maintaining narrative frames. In the last section, we saw that Jane and Arthur, a stable couple, suggested the growth in their relationship resulted from choosing a compatible partner with whom they could have a healthy relationship. They also felt like they could deal with tensions around "making ends meet." According to Jane, "We might be able to move up a little bit in the world, but if we can't, we can't. If we're still living here, we'll make it livable." Three years later, Jane still used this narrative frame to suggest these tensions were manageable and that their relationship was an upward trajectory, even after new tensions emerged over their division of childcare responsibilities and their interactions with Arthur's ex-wife. Because these new tensions did not challenge their basic understanding of the relationship or its trajectory, both partners continued to feel it was worthwhile to work their problems through. As with parents in other stable unions, communication was viewed as important for their ability to navigate these issues and their continued growth.

I just basically say something and he says, "Oh, oh okay, I understand." And then it's taken care of. And that's it . . . You know how some people grow apart from each other? I think him and I are growing together . . . maybe we'll be able to make more money in the future, and eventually move ahead, but I don't see any changes (Jane).

In addition to choosing the right partner, Arthur believed that the couple's communication and commitment to work on the relationship now also explained why they were able to grow in the face of additional problems: "We get along great . . . if we do have a disagreement, we talk . . . I think we've

got something pretty good and it's worth working on . . . we're both growing."

Although parents in stable unions maintained a narrative frame in which new tensions were viewed as part of the progress occurring in their relationships, parents in unstable unions continued to view their tensions as unmanageable at the second interview. Consistent with their previous accounts, parents in unstable unions also typically suggested that their relationships ended because of their failure to make progress in resolving several interacting sources of tension between them. Particularly troublesome issues for unstable couples over trust, communication, and their family or social networks again appeared in their accounts of union dissolution. However, women also identified new tensions in the relationship over their partner's abuse and infidelity, which were described both as reinforcing narrative frames that were already in place and as triggering the breakup.

Earlier, Jim said that his relationship with Lauren was not moving forward because they did not make a clear commitment or choice to be together. Similar to parents in other unstable unions, he also identified communication as a major source of tension in their relationship, which then made it difficult to resolve other issues they were facing: "It's just like when I sit down and try to talk, she'll close up. It frustrates me . . . [I tell her] If you see a problem, let me know . . . don't wait until it explodes or implodes inside you." At the second interview, Jim explained why they separated within this narrative frame that highlighted a lack of communication and progress:

I felt like our relationship had been tried by fire. We'd been through everything together. We'd been through the financial battles. We'd been through the in-law battle . . . We'd been through infidelity. We'd been through me and two jobs. We were through it all . . . I think when you don't talk about things, it builds up too much tension, and then things just explode . . . Where if all along we had been talking and resolving each problem as it occurred, then our relationship probably could have lasted.

Some important differences between parents' discussion of tensions in the first and second interview were around the issues of abuse and infidelity. These

were also the issues around which partners' explanations for the breakup diverged most sharply. Lauren said the tensions she mentioned at the first interview had been ongoing, but she decided to end what she perceived to be a troubled relationship when Jim became verbally abusive. Although Lauren's account resembles reasons some other women in unstable unions gave for separating, more often, women talked about not wanting to expose their children to incidents of physical violence.

It was just something that was continuously going on. It started before she was even born. And then, we wanted to make it work, because of her. So we kind of just stayed together. And then it got to a point where I was like, "I can't do it anymore," because he became abusive, and I said "No." Because I'm miserable, and that's gonna get my children miserable. And my children are more important (Lauren).

As with the issue of abuse, women in unstable unions said that infidelity could reinforce the idea that tensions with their partner were beyond repair. Christina explained, "When he came home with a hickey on his neck, that's when it all started. Everything just hit the fan then. And I was like - no way. You're not about to do this to me. We already go through too much as it is."

Changing narrative frames. As these accounts suggest, the earlier narrative frames parents constructed about their relationships shaped their view of tensions that emerged after the first interview in the majority of cases. However, in about one third of couples, at least one parent shifted frames when events that were incongruous with their previous experiences transformed their basic understanding of the problems they were experiencing and their trajectory as a couple. Because parents in stable unions were less likely to shift frames than those in unstable unions, not surprisingly, most of these changes were in a negative direction. Similar to the reasons some women in unstable unions gave for ending their relationships, other women in relationships they initially framed in a positive way ended the relationship when their partner was unfaithful to them or when they viewed him as endangering them or their children. On the other hand, positive changes were motivated by the belief among men and women that their partner had overcome a personal problem, such

as substance abuse, with the help of a fathering, drug rehabilitation, or 12-step program.

At the first interview, Kimberly, a first-time White mother, attributed the tensions she was experiencing with her partner, Gary, to common issues parents face after having a new baby: “Pretty much the only thing [we argue about is] who’s going to wake up at night for the baby” and identified a limited change—having their “own place”—that would ease these tensions. Gary also viewed their relationship as progressing and normalized the tensions between them:

It’s gotten tighter. It’s gotten tighter. Well, we argue more now. But the things we argue about now are wholesome, you know, family type things . . . 3:00 in the morning, who’s gonna get up and change the baby. I mean. No. I don’t spend enough time with her. But that’s only because I’m trying to get us out of the situation that we’re in [by getting a job].

Although the couple was living in temporary housing, they fully expected to stay together because they had established a strong identity around their commitment to support each other.

Kimberly’s perception of the relationship changed radically after they temporarily lost custody of their children during a period when she and her partner were both homeless. At the second interview, she held Gary responsible for “tearing the family apart” when he left the children alone in park while he was using drugs and they were picked up by Child Protective Services. Adding insult to injury, he was also unfaithful to her around this time. From her perspective, the tensions they were experiencing over not having a permanent place to live then became intolerable: “He was cheating on me, the kids were in the system, I was on the streets at the time . . . There were so many things that made it so stressful, I didn’t really know what to do.” Because Kimberly interpreted Gary’s behavior as evidence of abdicating his commitment to take care of their children, it was untenable for her to stay in the relationship. In contrast, Gary felt he had protected and provided for his family during a difficult time in their lives and suggested that the relationship did not progress because he and Kimberly were not well suited for each other.

Parents in stable unions also reframed what was initially considered a problematic relationship after an unexpected development fundamentally shifted their interpretation of this situation. At the first interview, Joaquin, a first-time Latino father, said that the major source of tension in his relationship with Hope was over trust. Because parents typically considered this a precondition for a lasting relationship, he was uncertain about their future together, saying: “no use in being with someone if you don’t trust.” In addition to tensions over trust, Hope problematized the relationship because of his drug use, their “constant arguing,” and their living situation. Unable to explain their trajectory up to this point with a model of enduring relationships, she did not anticipate progress in the future:

I don’t know why, but we’re still together . . . It hasn’t changed too much. Actually, I was hoping that it would change . . . But then I have to really stop and think: is it really gonna happen? Do you really think this is going to happen? And to tell you the truth, I don’t really think it will happen, so I probably see myself going my separate way.

Despite their uncertainty about the future at the first interview, 3 years later, Hope and Joaquin were motivated to make the relationship succeed after Joaquin was able to overcome his substance-use problems. According to both parents’ accounts, this unexpected shift resulted from a personal transformation that Joaquin made while he was in prison. At the second interview, Hope identified two limited sources of tension—Joaquin’s inability to find a regular job and her decision to support her adult daughter financially. However, she framed these tensions as manageable in the context of a committed relationship that was moving forward:

Most of the time why we argue is because of that. But other than that, we get along fine. . . . A lot has changed, I think. He’s grown up a lot. . . . He came out a different person. He’s more family oriented. He worries if there’s milk, or we have to go get the baby what he needs. He helps me. I think he changed. . . . It’s got to mean something if we’re still together.

Hope could now make sense of a relationship trajectory that was previously difficult to explain, viewing Joaquin's ability to overcome his substance-use problem as a process of natural maturity. Joaquin more directly attributed this transformation to his participation in a program for incarcerated fathers, which gave him the opportunity to learn from his past mistakes and from the experiences of other men in his group. He explained that Hope learned to trust him after she observed this new commitment to his family:

We don't really have no trips no more . . . She hung in there, and I had to make a change to come back. I had to learn to accept that I'm a family man . . . I guess everybody learns from their mistakes. Maybe it's better that I went in there and caught myself before it got any worse, before I lost my family. There's people that do lose their family over that, and it ain't worth it.

It is important to note that two other couples in the study looked like unstable couples at the first interview but were still together at the follow-up interview. Rather than indicating they had changed their perceptions, the accounts of these parents suggest that they were simply delaying separation at the second interview.

Discussion

This study provides new information about how an ethnically and racially diverse group of disadvantaged partners in nontraditional families viewed tensions in their fragile relationships soon after having a child together. Information from longitudinal interviews with both partners not only documents how parents' understanding of tensions and their relationship trajectories differ in stable and unstable unions but also offers insight into the kind of issues that may undermine or support relationship longevity in poor communities where couples often face multiple stressors and challenges (Dion, 2005). These results suggest that parents' fragile relationships may be quickly torn apart if they perceive a complex knot of tensions in their relationships as unmanageable, intractable, and mutually reinforcing.

Results from the first year of the study showed that both partners in stable and unstable unions

identified common tensions over their economic and housing situations, the division of child care and household responsibilities, and personal problems with one or both of the partners. Partners in unstable relationships also highlighted tensions around communication, trust, and their family and social networks, which they viewed both as resulting from and fueling other tensions between them. Perceiving several interacting sources of tension led partners in unstable unions to frame the tensions they were experiencing as problematic and intractable. In contrast, partners in stable unions, who had some of the same objective risks for union dissolution, viewed tensions in their relationship as more manageable and amenable to change. This interpretation made the tensions couples were experiencing more tolerable for parents in stable unions.

These frames also made sense within the narratives couples told about their relationships. Whereas parents in stable unions often presented their relationships as being on a positive trajectory, couples who dissolved their unions tended to view the course of their relationships as both volatile and uncertain. Drawing on cultural models of enduring unions, parents in stable unions suggested either their choice or commitment to the relationship led to continued progress and growth. In a socioeconomic context where enduring relationships were often undermined by external stressors (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004; Mincy, 2006), constructing a shared identity as a highly compatible or committed couple also brought special recognition and set them apart from their peers. Conversely, unstable couples referred to models of enduring unions to explain their failure to make progress and suggested that the kind of tensions they experienced generated both public and private misgivings about the relationship.

Couples' follow-up interviews showed that narrative frames they constructed around tensions in their relationship were applied to new and ongoing issues they faced in the coming years if expectations about their relationship were met. In particular, parents in stable unions continued to frame tensions as manageable within a relationship that was progressing, influencing their decision to maintain the union, and unstable couples continued to refer to several interacting tensions mentioned in the first year to explain why their relationship dissolved. However, women also identified new issues around abuse and infidelity that motivated them to end what they had perceived to be a troubled relationship. Although

these findings suggest that narrative frames take on a certain momentum after they are in place, unexpected negative or positive developments could also transform parents' basic understanding of the relationship, compelling couples to modify their accounts.

Parents in stable and unstable unions' perceptions of their relationship trajectories, and particular issues like trust and social networks, seem to parallel those of partners in relationship-driven and event-driven couples identified by Surra (e.g., Surra & Gray, 2000; Surra & Hughes, 1997). Consistent with previous research, the accounts of parents in this study also suggest that the way they characterized their relationship trajectory was less important than the fact that they were able to explain this trajectory within an existing cultural model (Swidler, 2001) and perceived their relationship to be moving forward (Karney & Frye, 2002). Because partners in unstable unions did not romanticize the volatility of their relationships (Illouz, 1997; Orbach, Veroff, & Holmberg, 1993), they may have already begun to "uncouple" from each other by recasting their relationship and partner in a negative light (Vaughan, 1986).

Although parents in this study faced some of the same external constraints as more advantaged couples, they seemed to experience these tensions in a more intense way. For example, research consistently shows that male earnings are positively related to union progression and stability in the general population (e.g., Ruggles, 1997), but both stable and unstable couples in this study were subject to these economic challenges during a time when African American men and those at lower educational levels have experienced a sharp decline in employment and an increased risk of incarceration (Mincy, 2006). Negative interactions with social networks are also associated with volatility in the relationships of more advantaged couples (Surra & Hughes, 1997). In addition to living in one of the most expensive housing markets in the country, couples in this study may have been more vulnerable to these pressures because low-income families pay a larger proportion of their income for housing and often have very limited access to housing assistance.

The results of this study also point to important similarities and differences in the way advantaged and disadvantaged partners perceived tensions related to their interactions. Like middle-class couples who find they have conflicting expectations about how domestic responsibilities should be shared following the transition to parenthood, the couples in this

study suggested that negotiating these responsibilities after having a new child represented an important source of tension in their relationships (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Because these parents did not follow a traditional path to family formation and often had children from previous relationships, however, this situation may have been even more difficult to negotiate. Previous research suggests that communication and fidelity are also central concerns for many middle-class couples (Amato & Previti, 2003; Swidler, 2001). At the same time, the high level of suspicion described by both male and female partners in the study may also stem from traditional ideas about gender, a "culture of gender distrust" in low-income communities, and women's prior or current experiences with domestic violence (Cherlin, Burton, Hunt, & Purvin, 2004; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Furstenberg, 2001).

In about one third of the couples in the study, at least one partner changed frames at the follow-up interview, often in relation to personal problems. Women's motivation both to end and to reframe their relationships in cases of abuse and infidelity is consistent with findings about why couples alter the interpretive schema through which they view relationships (Planalp & Surra, 1992; Reissman, 1990). These responses may reflect higher expectations for relationships and a lower tolerance for domestic violence among women in contemporary society, as well as a higher risk of abuse among poor women (Cherlin et al., 2004). The salience of overcoming personal problems, like substance use, for positive changes in parents' perceptions may also reflect the high incidence of these risks in fragile families (Waller & Swisher, 2006).

Implications

In recent years, federal and state governments have committed new resources to marriage education programs for disadvantaged married and unmarried couples as part of a larger strategy aimed at strengthening marriage. Despite considerable variation, many programs focus on providing information and skills to couples within a group setting (Dion, 2005). Because these programs were typically designed for middle and higher income White populations and few of the programs have been rigorously evaluated, it is still unclear how effective they will be for lower income couples in racially diverse communities

(Dion; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Interviews with parents in this study provide insight into how these programs could be designed to support parents' fragile relationships over the term, whether as cohabiting or married partners.

Similarities Between Parents

Economic problems involving parents' employment, wages, and housing were the types of tensions most often cited by parents. These issues emerged in a larger socioeconomic context in which more men at lower educational levels have found it difficult to find employment, particularly in African American communities, and more women have been pushed into the low-wage labor market following changes in welfare policy (Mincy, 2006). For partners in stable unions, economic problems were the only issues they did not view as improving between the first and second interview, possibly threatening the long-term stability of these relationships. As marriage education programs designed for more advantaged couples are adapted for low-income families, it is critical they not only recognize the significant economic pressures these couples are facing but also help couples connect to housing, job training, income, and work supports (Dion, 2005; Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Two other types of tensions that often appeared in the accounts of partners in stable and unstable unions centered on the division of domestic responsibilities and personal problems of one or both partners. In a study of higher income, married couples, Cowan and Cowan (1992) found that the gender division of labor often becomes more traditional around the transition to parenthood, fueling feelings of dissatisfaction between partners. Group interventions that focused on these issues helped reduce some of the dissatisfaction couples experienced and also helped fathers feel more psychologically connected to their children (Cowan & Cowan, 2002). Programs that teach couples coparenting skills may have the added benefit of helping parents raise their children cooperatively if they should later separate (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Personal problems were often identified as factors that triggered the breakup or that fundamentally changed the way partners perceived the relationship. Because parents' experiences overcoming substance abuse with the help of a fathering, drug rehabilitation, or 12-step program motivated positive shifts in perceptions, these findings suggest that programs

providing treatment and outreach to one or both partners, including those located within prisons, may help couples stabilize their relationships (Arditti, Lambert-Shute & Joest, 2003). At the same time, women's accounts of ending or reframing their relationship in cases of abuse show that encouraging relationship longevity when parents have personal problems may sometimes be inappropriate. Longitudinal interviews with parents also suggest that some women may not acknowledge violence until after the relationship has dissolved. Adequate training of marriage education counselors will be critical to ensure that they can deal with these risks, screen for domestic violence, and help victims of violence and substance abuse connect to community services. The presence of serious risks in couples' relationships also underscores the importance of ensuring that marriage education programs are voluntary for both partners. When addressing these and other tensions, the focus of programs should be on improving the quality of relationship rather than promoting or preserving marriage because children whose parents are in high-conflict relationships may suffer regardless of their relationship status (Cowan & Cowan, 2002).

Differences Between Parents

Parents' accounts also suggested that partners in unstable unions were more often struggling with issues related to communication, trust, and their social networks. Although many couples seemed to recognize the value of relationship skills, such as communication, taught in marriage education programs, partners in unstable unions often noted difficulties with a range of interactions addressed by these programs, such as listening to and expressing feelings, conflict management, and empathy (Dion, 2005). Curricula used in programs for higher income couples could be adapted to address the kind of issues low-income couples in diverse race-ethnic communities have difficulty communicating about, such as chronic unemployment, incarceration, housing problems, multipartner fertility, and substance use and to address issues of trust and fidelity (Dion). In the process of doing so, it is important that programs are sensitive to the larger context in which feelings of distrust may develop in poor communities. Importantly, for women, distrust may also be linked to traumatic experiences, such as a history of physical or sexual abuse (Dion; Cherlin et al., 2004). Because tensions over parents' social and family

networks were also a particular problem in unstable unions, programs should recognize that disadvantaged couples often live with family members and may rely on these networks for survival (Stack, 1974). It may also be important to use an ecosystemic model when designing educational interventions that views the couple relationship as embedded in a larger social context and may help practitioners better address conflict related to parents' peers and extended families (Larson, 2004).

Tolerance of Tensions

In journalistic accounts, families in poverty have been portrayed as experiencing a complex constellation of problems that are often mutually reinforcing (Shipler, 2004). Findings in this study suggest that it may be particularly beneficial for programs to help partners view the complicated set of tensions they are often experiencing as manageable, to create a shared identity as a couple who can "beat the odds," to recognize progress as individuals and as a couple, and to rethink older narratives in light of positive developments. In the same way that individual therapy may be thought of as an opportunity for story repair (Howard, 1991), group interventions may allow partners in other circumstances to modify the way in which they frame problems. Of course, programs should never encourage parents to redefine or tolerate behavior that may endanger them or their children.

Research on low to moderate risk married couples also shows the importance of an intensive intervention led by staff with clinical skills who have been trained to work with complex issues in couples' relationships (Cowan & Cowan, 1995). Intensive interventions led by highly trained staff may be even more important for high-risk couples like those in this study who are experiencing multiple problems. Because parents' accounts indicate that negative frames did not typically change after the birth, it may be more effective to offer interventions around the transition to parenthood, before couples' have perceived their problems as intractable (Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Larson, 2004). Because the issues parents are struggling with come not only from internal but also from external sources, the success of these interventions will also depend on the presence of a strong social safety net that makes supports such as housing, income support, job training, substance use, and mental health services available to parents.

Providing these income-tested supports to parents on the basis of individual rather than family eligibility would also help more couples access benefits when they living in the same household (McLanahan, 2004).

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