

**HAPPILY EVER AFTER?:  
Religion, Gender, and Relationship Quality  
among Cohabiting and Married Families**

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The last four decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in family pluralism (Cherlin 1992; Bumpass and Lu 2000; Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986; Ventura *et al.* 2000). Consequently, many children in the United States will spend some time apart from an intact, married household. Specifically, one-third of all children are born outside marriage, approximately 40 percent of all children today are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting household, and an estimated 50 percent of all children today will spend some time living in a single-parent or stepfamily household (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Moffit and Rendall 1995; Ventura *et al.* 2000).

Family pluralism is especially prevalent among minority and poor and working-class families with children in urban America; in these communities, the majority of children are born outside of marriage (Mare and Winship 1991; McLanahan forthcoming; Ventura *et al.* 2000). Many of these children, however, are born into cohabiting unions where both unmarried parents are raising their children together (Brown 2004; Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004). Consequently, the majority of children currently born in urban America are born into a married or cohabiting household, where the parents either cohabit or visit one another regularly (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001). In other words, most urban children are born into a family where both of their parents are in some type of intimate relationship.

Historically, religious institutions have played a central role in shaping the character and quality of intimate relationships between married parents (Christiano 2000). Religion has been shown to influence marital quality directly by fostering a range of relationship-related values, norms, and social supports that reinforce partners' commitment to one another and to marriage itself, and help them negotiate the challenges of married life (Christiano 2000; Nock *et al.*

forthcoming; Wilcox 2004;). Religion also has an indirect effect on marriage insofar as religious belief and practice tend to promote psychological well-being, prosocial norms, and social support among partners, all of which are also linked to higher-quality marriages (Amato and Booth 1997; Ellison 1994; Gottman 2000). Accordingly, most studies indicate that religious practice is associated with higher levels of marital quality (Christiano 2000; Greeley 1990; Wilcox 2004; but see Booth 1995).

But no research has yet determined if religious practice is associated with higher relationship quality among cohabiting parents. The normative stress that most religious traditions place on marriage as the ideal site for sex and childbearing, and the stigma that religious groups have traditionally placed on nonmarital childbearing, extramarital sex, and cohabitation (Christiano 2000; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992; Thornton 1985), suggests that cohabiting parents who are active churchgoers may not get normative and social support for nonmarital relationships. Indeed, they may be sanctioned for such relationships. On the other hand, cohabiting parents' relationships may benefit indirectly from the social and psychological support provided by religious participation. Thus, one of the central aims of this study is to determine if religious participation is associated with higher quality relationships among both married *and* cohabiting parents in urban America.

Research on religion and marriage also suggests that men's relationship behavior is influenced more by the institutional contexts of their relationship than women's relationship behavior (Nock 1998; Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2003; Wilcox 2004). Men seem to be motivated more than women to invest themselves in their relationships by institutions "surrounded by convention and custom"—such as marriage and religion—that stress the importance of long-term relational commitments (Nock 1998: 108; Wilcox 2004). Thus, this

study also seeks to determine if the effect of men's religious participation is greater than women's religious participation on the relationship quality of urban parents. Of course, the effect of religious participation may be particularly powerful for married fathers, insofar as these men are integrated into two institutional contexts that stress the importance of long-term commitment.

Thus, using longitudinal data from three waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001), which follows urban parents in 20 cities around the nation, this study aims to answer two central questions: (1) Is religious participation associated with the quality of intimate relationships for both married and cohabiting parents; and, (2) Do the effects of religious participation on relationships in urban America vary by gender? The answers to these questions are important for three reasons. First, religious institutions remain some of the most important civic actors in urban America yet we know little about how they are doing in reaching out to the growing number of cohabiting families in urban America, who would have traditionally been shunned or shamed by these institutions (Ellingson 2004). They are also important because religious participation of urban fathers tends to be lower than that of urban mothers, which may offset any distinctive religiously-motivated relational boost for fathers. Finally, because parental relationship quality is of paramount importance for the well-being children, the effects of religious participation—especially any differential effects for married and cohabiting parents—on the quality of the parental relationship may have serious implications for the well-being of children growing up in urban families (Amato and Booth 1997; Brown 2004).

Preliminary analyses indicate that the effects of religious participation on relationship quality vary by gender and marital status. Married fathers' religious participation is consistently associated with higher levels of relationship quality and partner emotional support for both

married parents; married mothers' religious participation is only linked to higher levels of relationship quality for married fathers. For cohabiting fathers, their religious participation is linked to reports of higher levels of cohabiting mothers' emotional support; they also report lower levels of domestic violence if their female cohabiting partners attend frequently. But for cohabiting mothers, fathers' religious participation is linked to higher reports of domestic violence and their own attendance is linked to lower levels of relationship quality. In sum, these analyses suggest that religious participation is generally associated with better relationships for married parents but not cohabiting parents. They also suggest that religious participation is particularly important for married fathers; religious participation appears less important for cohabiting fathers and for both married and cohabiting mothers.

In conclusion, our preliminary analyses suggest that religious participation fosters better relationship quality among married urban parents but not necessarily among cohabiting urban parents. Moreover, fathers who are both married and religiously active seem particularly likely to experience high quality relationships, and to have partners who report high levels of relationship quality. Accordingly, this study indicates that the effects of religion on urban parents' relationships do indeed diverge by the cohabiting/marital status of those parents.