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Marriage, Coparenting, & Family Work Over Time: A Latent Growth Curve Analysis

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SCHOOL OF FAMILY LIFE

ABSTRACT
Using data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (n = 1,024 couples), we examined the associations between parenting, similarity in parenting, and emotional intimacy. Mothers’ initial level of family work responsibility was the most significant predictor of emotional intimacy for both Fathers and Mothers. More traditional, adult-centered parenting beliefs were also associated with decreased emotional intimacy for Mothers. Similarity in family work and parenting beliefs showed stability overtime. In general, similarity in parenting and consensus in family work activities was not as significantly associated with emotional intimacy as the individual parenting constructs.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Becoming parents increases stress, decreases leisure, and changes role division in households. Despite these changes, the addition of a new child may deteriorate, enrich, or have little impact on one’s marital union (Belsky & Hsheh, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrera, 2000). What accounts for the variability in individual trajectories of parents’ marital change? Family systems theory (Bowen, 1987; Minuchin, 1974) suggests that the family is an interconnected unit in which each individual and each relationship among individuals— influences all the others. The systemic idea of an “executive subsystem” highlights the importance of the coparenting dyad in family life.

Thus, how each spouse parent the child(ren), how the other parent views the parenting, and how spouses parent together (coparenting) should influence the parents’ marital relationship. Coparenting is defined as “the ways that parents work together in their roles as parents” (Feinberg, 2002, p. 173).

Coparenting incorporates multiple dimensions of couple interaction, including: - childrearing agreement - division of labor - support/undermining - joint family management - coping/solidarity

Healthy marriages are linked with healthier coparenting relationships (McHale et al., 2004). Coparenting may have differential effects on marriage over time (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004).

Over time the coparental relationship seems to take on more significant meaning in the husband-wife relationship.

Little research has considered how parenting and coparenting influence marriage over an extended period of time. This study adds to the body of coparenting research by addressing the following research questions:
1. How similar are couples’ parenting attitudes and beliefs about household role division?
2. After considering demographic and child factors (ethnicity, number of years married, family’s average income to needs ratio, whether or not the target child is first born), how do couples’ marital intimacy, parenting beliefs, and report of household role division develop over time?
3. Similarly, after considering the same demographic and child factors noted above, how do couples’ similarity in parenting beliefs and report of household role division (coparenting indices) change over time?
4. How are mothers’ and fathers’ parenting beliefs and report of household role division related to emotional intimacy for both mothers and fathers?
5. How is similarity in parenting beliefs and report of household role division (coparenting indices) related to emotional intimacy for both mothers and fathers?

STRENGTHS OF PRESENT STUDY

The large scale of this study and access to individual and dyadic data regarding children, mothers, and fathers in the same family builds on earlier studies that lacked a geographically diverse sample and independent measurement.

The long-term longitudinal assessment in this study provides a unique understanding of the developmental processes that occur in coparental and marital relationships over time.

METHODS

SAMPLE
Data was taken from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Researchers recruited participants from 31 hospitals in or near 10 geographic sites across the United States. Recruitment resulted in a sample of 1,364 healthy infants and their families. A subset of married or cohabitating participants was used in this study (n = 1,024 couples).

Data were collected when the children were 1, 6, 15, 24, 36, 54 months old, at first, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, and when the child was 15 years old.

In cases where complete data was not available at all time points full maximum likelihood estimation was used to account for missing values.

MEASURES
Responsibility for family work and child care (Glysch & Vandell, 1992) Traditional, adult-centered parenting beliefs (Shafer & Edgerton, 1985)

Similarity between parents in each of the parenting measures (Intraclass Correlations)

Assessment of the level of emotional intimacy (Schafer & Olson, 1981)

ANALYSIS PLAN
We first calculated similarity between spouses in report of family work and child care responsibility and in traditional parenting beliefs. We used the Intraclass Correlation between parents, adjusted for stereotype accuracy, based on the recommendations of Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006).

Next, using latent growth curve analysis in Mplus version 5 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007), we modeled change in each of the variables over time, necessarily considering non-linear trajectories of change.

Finally, we considered how the intercepts (initial levels) of each of the variables and the slopes (change over time) were interrelated for each of the parenting, coparenting indexes, and emotional intimacy variables.

RESULTS
Based on the model fit indexes, the model fit the data well, (χ²(677) = 1062.427, p < .01; CFI = .968; TLI = .952; RMSEA = .024).

In general, parents showed a small amount of similarity in parenting beliefs, with a mean similarity intercept of .103. They showed much more similarity in report of responsibility for family work, with an mean similarity intercept of .315. Similarity scores were stable overtime, with little change in mean similarity levels.

Fathers’ mean emotional intimacy intercept was 23.974, with an average linear slope of -.169 and an average quadratic slope of .008.

Mothers’ mean emotional intimacy intercept was 23.836, with an average linear slope of -.221 and an average quadratic slope of .010.

Thus, in our study, mothers’ emotional intimacy decreases at a higher rate than does fathers’.

However, the quadratic slope for both mothers and fathers showed a slight increase as children moved into grade school.

Fathers’ intercept for report of family work (2.442) was notably lower than mothers’ (3.972) and both showed stability over time.

Fathers’ also tended to have slightly more traditional parenting beliefs (2.814) than Mothers’ (2.757). Traditional parenting attitudes also showed stability over time for both parents.

As would be expected Fathers’ and Mothers’ emotional intimacy intercepts were significantly correlated (r = .437). Their linear and quadratic slopes were also highly correlated (rs = .852 and .872 respectively).

For Mothers, her own report of family work responsibility was most highly correlated with her level of emotional intimacy (-.199), with a report of greater responsibility for family work being associated with a decreased level of emotional intimacy.

Interestingly, for Fathers, Mothers’ report of family work responsibility was also most highly associated with his level of emotional intimacy (-.195). Thus, as the Mother shoulders a greater proportion of family work, emotional intimacy declines for both spouses.

Mothers’ intercept for traditional parenting beliefs was associated with a decreased level of emotional intimacy for mothers only (r = .171). Mother and father intercepts of traditional parenting beliefs were also correlated (r = .486).

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the key finding of this study is that parenting is associated with emotional intimacy over a significant amount of time.

1. For the overall sample, similarity in parenting seems to have only a small effect on emotional intimacy.

2. Gendered distinctions between fathers and mothers seem to indicate that spouses may consider the impact of family work and parenting in distinct ways, depending on their gender.

3. Future research can examine variability in couple relationships across parenting and marital domains. Considering how couples group together may be useful to better understanding the dynamics between the parenting and marital subsystems.

IMPLICATIONS

Couples may do well to periodically evaluate the way they partition roles within the home and consider the impact their roles have on their marriage.