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

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**SCHOOL OF FAMILY LIFE**

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**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.

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**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 decrease, enrich, or have little impact on one's marital union (Belsky & Hetherington, 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, 1978; Minuchin, 1974) suggests that the family is an interconnected unit in which each individual—and each relationship among individuals— influencizes all the others. The systemic idea of an “executive subsystem” highlights the importance of the coparenting dyad in family life. Thus, how each spouse parents 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.”

Coparenting may have differential effects on marriage over time (Feinberg, 2002, p. 173). Healthy marriages are linked with healthier coparenting relationships (McHale et al., 2004). Coparenting is defined as “the ways that parents work together in their roles as parents.”

**RESULTS**

Extended period of time. This study adds to the body of coparenting research by addressing the variability in couple relationships across M. Future research can examine variability in coparenting across family work roles. This study examined similarity in coparenting roles and how they related to emotional intimacy. Notably, the study found that similarity in coparenting roles was related to increased emotional intimacy over a significant amount of time. As expected, Fathers’ and Mothers’ emotional intimacy intercepts were significantly correlated (r = .437). Their linear and quadratic slopes were also highly correlated (rs = .852 and .672, 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 (-.159). 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 decrease in emotional intimacy for mothers only (r = .117). Mother and father intercepts of traditional parenting beliefs were also correlated (r = .466).

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**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).

Results 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 a linear maximum likelihood estimation was used to account for missing values. **MEASURES**

Responsibility for family work and child care (Glass & 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.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Perhaps the key finding of this study is that parenting is associated with emotional intimacy over a significant amount of time. • For the overall sample, similarity in parenting seems to have only a small effect on emotional intimacy. • 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. • 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.