

**Intergenerational Relationships and Union Stability in Fragile Families**

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## **Abstract**

Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ( $N=2,648$ ), we examine the association between intergenerational family relationships and the union stability of married and unmarried parents over 5 years after a baby's birth. Our results show that more amiable relationships between fathers and the baby's maternal grandparents are associated with a greater likelihood of marriage, and the focal child's spending more time with their paternal grandparents is linked with cohabitation. Children's greater contact with maternal grandparents is associated with diminished union stability, although this result is not robust to methods that better address selection. Our findings underscore the importance of considering broader social contexts for understanding contemporary patterns of union formation and dissolution among parents with children.

*Keywords:* Fragile Families, Intergenerational Relationships, Union Stability

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### INTRODUCTION

Family structure and stability have long been of interest to social scientists, given the fundamental role that families play in rearing and socializing children. We know that children who spend time in single-parent families, and children who experience multiple family transitions, are at greater risk of experiencing psychological problems, having sex or bearing children at an early age, dropping out of high school, and a host of other negative outcomes—compared to children who grow up with both biological parents (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Amato, 2005; Fomby and Cherlin 2007). Therefore, both researchers and policymakers have been concerned with the factors that predict union stability, particularly among couples with children.

Research to date has emphasized the role of individual- and couple-level characteristics in predicting the stability of marital and nonmarital unions (e.g., Lichter et al., 1991; Smock, 2000). We do not, however, know much about how extended family relationships influence the stability of couple relationships. A limited body of literature has examined the influence of network ties on relationships among college students and on long-term marriages (Bryant and Conger, 1999; Bryant, Conger, and Meehan, 2001; Sprecher and Felmlee, 1992), but these studies focus on special types of unions found early or late in the life course and are limited to small, nonrepresentative samples. The extent to which extended family relationships influence union stability remains largely unexplored with respect to relationship trajectories for both married and unmarried couples subsequent to a new baby's birth.

In this paper, we use data from four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ( $N=2,648$ ) to address the following research question: Do intergenerational relationships—between the parents of a focal child (married and unmarried) and their own parents (i.e., the child's maternal and paternal grandparents), as well as the child's interaction with grandparents—influence couples' relationship stability during the first 5 years of a child's life? For simplicity, we refer to fathers' parents as *paternal grandparents* and mothers' parents as *maternal grandparents* throughout. We draw on social

integration and uncertainty reduction theories to argue that more positive relationships between partners and extended kin likely increase union stability after the birth of a child. Our results suggest that stronger relationships between fathers and maternal grandparents, and greater interaction between paternal grandparents (but not maternal grandparents) and the focal child, increase the probability that couples will be living together (either cohabiting or legally married) in the child's 5th year.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Theoretical consideration of the importance of social integration dates back to Durkheim's (1951) seminal work on suicide. We learned from Durkheim that the interplay between an individual and a collectivity has the potential to shape individual outcomes, including (his focus) one's decision to commit suicide. Social isolation, regardless of the cause, separates individuals from the larger collectivity that gives them a sense of belonging. Although Durkheim never actually defined "social integration" (Moen, Dempster-McClain, and Williams, 1989), it is typically conceived as the connectedness of individuals through a set of shared beliefs and norms constituting a collectivity (e.g., families or religious organizations), legitimizing its members, and providing a sense of purpose. Social approval and emotional support in ongoing relationships contribute to the sense of purpose that social integration affords (Booth, Edwards, and Johnson, 1991).

Even amidst major changes in family demography in recent years, families remain important social institutions governed by norms and shared beliefs, where dyadic relationships affect each other and influence individual outcomes and change (Minuchin, 1988; O'Brien, 2005). Scholars argue that intergenerational relationships are one of the most important aspects of family life, which retain importance even as children become adults—and especially when grandchildren are involved (Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg, 1993). The quality of intergenerational relationships is largely dependent on shared norms of mutual obligation across the life course (Lye, 1996), and the initial dependence of children on their parents, the permanence of the parent-child relationship, and the social force toward family identity

make intergenerational ties central to social integration (Umberson, 1992). These relationships can have enduring effects on adult children, including their attitudes toward—and behavior in—romantic relationships (Bryant et al., 2001).

Spouses are expected to form relationships with their in-laws, even if they are not very similar to them (Bryant et al., 2001), and this expected interaction can place stress on couples or can offer important benefits. Uncertainty reduction theory posits that reducing uncertainty is a driving force in relational development (Berger, 1987). When parents or friends disapprove of or are at odds with one's romantic partner or spouse, it may reduce one's assurance about the relationship or choice of partner and place strain on the relationship. By contrast, approval from members of one's social network helps reduce uncertainty and increases confidence about a romantic partner and gives couples a sense of shared "couple" identity (Sprecher and Felmlee, 1992). When intergenerational relationships are strong, this integration reinforces social norms, serves as social control, and facilitates communication within marital unions (Booth et al., 1991; Stets, 1991).

Family expectations for partners in terms of family commitment and financial contributions may become greater once a couple has children together. Transitions into parenthood have been shown to both improve and cause stress in adult child-parent relationships (Rossi and Rossi, 1990; Spitze, Logan, Deane, and Zerger, 1994; Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 1998), but there is some evidence that parents provide greater support to their adult children who have young children than those who do not (Eggebeen and Hogan, 1990). This provision of social support may signal either that grandparents are contributing to the future success and social mobility of their adult child and family (e.g., middle-class grandparents loaning money for the purchase of a home) or that the family is in need (e.g., help making ends meet). Thus, it's important to note the potential bi-directional nature of these familial ties.

Among family relationships, the marital union has historically been central to nuclear family dynamics (Cummings and O'Reilly, 1997). Until recent decades, the vast majority of individuals married, and most children were born within marriage (Cherlin, 2009); hence, intergenerational ties typically

involved a married couple with one or two sets of parents/in-laws. Delayed marriage, high divorce rates, and rising rates of nonmarital childbearing have diversified these family patterns and increased the complexity of intergenerational ties.

Greater numbers of children are now born outside of marriage than ever before: fully 40 percent of births in 2007 were to unmarried couples, with much higher proportions among racial and ethnic minorities (Hamilton, Martin, and Ventura, 2009). Children born to unmarried parents are at greater risk of experiencing multiple family transitions early in life compared to those born to married parents, and this instability is associated with negative outcomes (Fomby and Cherlin, 2007; Osborne and McLanahan, 2007). Between birth and age 5, children whose parents were unmarried at the time of birth experienced an average of 2.55 relationship transitions, compared to 0.67 for married parents (Beck, Cooper, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

Therefore, nonmarital childbearing complicates the process of reducing relationship uncertainty because it occurs within a less structured and less stable family context. Roughly half of nonmarital births are not planned (Abma, Chandra, Mosher, Petterson, and Piccinino, 1997), many unmarried relationships break up within only a few years of the baby's birth (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2007), and many unmarried parents have had children by prior partners (Carlson and Furstenberg, 2006). Such circumstances bring tremendous challenges to establishing strong kin ties, given the fragility (and often complexity) of the new "family" unit.

We might expect intergenerational relationships to differentially affect particular union types. Even though shifting demographic trends have made cohabitation a more normative family form (Bumpass, 1990; Cherlin, 2009), grandparents are typically more conservative (Johnson, 1988). Therefore, stronger ties with grandparents may encourage marriage (i.e., the more "traditional" union type) more than cohabitation.

## Empirical Evidence

### *Predictors of Union Stability*

An extensive body of empirical research has examined the factors that affect union formation and stability, particularly marriage. This literature has primarily emphasized the role of individual- and couple-level factors, with little attention to “external” relationships that may affect the couple relationship. Race and socioeconomic characteristics are important factors that affect the likelihood of marriage (Lichter et al., 1991) or divorce (Cherlin, 2005). We know, for example, that men’s earnings play a significant role in marriage decisions in both disadvantaged populations and more advantaged populations (Blau, Kahn, and Waldfogel, 2000; Lloyd and South, 1996; Sweeny, 2002), but the effects of women’s earnings are less consistent (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry, 1992; Ellwood and Jencks, 2004). Also, African Americans are less likely to marry; this may be because black women place more emphasis on men’s earnings than white women (Bulcroft and Bulcroft, 1993; Tucker, 2000), yet black men’s economic position has been declining (Wilson, 1996). Some evidence suggests that high incarceration rates among African American men further reduces the likelihood of union formation—and union stability—for couples (Western, Lopoo, and McLanahan, 2004). In addition, premarital cohabitation and young age at first marriage are predictors of marital instability (DeMaris and Rao, 1992; Smock, 2000; Dush, Cohan, and Amato, 2003), with notable differences between racial groups (Philips and Sweeney, 2005).

Although the majority of work on union stability has emphasized marital relationships, the rise in cohabiting unions and the decrease in marriage have increased attention to factors that affect the stability of nonmarital unions as well. A growing literature has explored the factors that affect union stability among unmarried parents with children; relationship instability is associated with relationship problems such as infidelity (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Hill, 2007), substance abuse (Reed, 2007), as well as physical violence and women’s distrust in men (Carlson, McLanahan, and England, 2004). Fathers’ multipartnered fertility is also shown to diminish union stability for couples over time (Carlson et al., 2004; Harknett and

McLanahan, 2004; Monte, 2007). Education, attitudes toward marriage, and partner support have also been shown to improve union stability and affect unmarried couples' decisions to marry (Brines and Joyner, 1999; Carlson et al.). Economic circumstances are a major source of stress in relationships that may contribute to union instability (Tach and Edin 2009), and low economic resources are identified in qualitative research as a key barrier to marriage (Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan, 2005). At the same time, Lichter, Qian, and Mellott (2006) found only marginal direct effects of women's employment and economic status on union stability among low-income cohabiting women. The availability of potential mates is an important contextual factor affecting marriage after a nonmarital birth (Harknett, 2008; Harknett and McLanahan, 2004).

### *External Relationships and Union Stability*

The literature on factors affecting union stability has largely ignored the potential influence of external relationships. In recent decades, however, sociologists have begun to examine the influence of larger social contexts, such as extended kin and friendship ties, on several specific types of unions. This research, which we summarize below, has primarily focused on relationships among college students and long-term married couples and has relied on small, nonrepresentative samples.

Existing evidence suggests that young couples in the process of forming new unions may be especially influenced by family and friends. For example, female college students whose family and friends supported their relationship were more likely to continue with the relationship than those whose relationship was not supported (Sprecher and Felmlee, 1992). However, at that age, there may be an important distinction between support from family versus friends, as one study finds that college students stayed together when their families *disapproved* of their relationships (the so-called "Romeo and Juliet effect") but only if their friends *approved* of the relationship (Felmlee, 2001). As the author notes, the over-representation of friends versus family in college social networks, and the potential that peer group support overrides family support, may explain this outcome. Young couples, particularly college students who are still searching for the right long-term partner, may be less influenced by their parents' views than

couples who are in more serious relationships with long-term expectations. At the same time, it has been shown that young couples themselves may play a role in shaping their parents' views of their relationships, especially as they move toward commitment (Leslie, Huston, and Johnson, 1986), underscoring the bi-directional nature of parent-child relationships (Crouter and Booth, 2003).

The influence of extended family ties on couples who are in more serious, adult relationships is likely to have a more lasting effect—both because of the more mature nature of the relationships themselves and also because (grand)children are more likely to be involved (Lye, 1996). Although research on how external relationships affect union formation and stability among adults (i.e., post-college) is limited, two studies have explored how relationships with in-laws influence marital success among long-term married couples with children living in a rural Midwestern state. Using a sample of 451 white married couples in the early 1990s, Bryant and colleagues found that family support for the marital relationship, as well as discord between spouses and in-laws, significantly influenced marital stability, satisfaction, and commitment over time (Bryant and Conger, 1999; Bryant et al., 2001). This finding is particularly striking, since the couples in the study had been married an average of 20 years, highlighting the important influence of parents on adult children's relationships across the life course.

It is less clear, however, whether the influence of these kin relationships holds true among more newly married couples with young children or in nonmarital unions with children. Also, we do not know how these associations bear out in socioeconomically disadvantaged families or among racial and ethnic minorities, where unions tend to be less stable (Osborne and McLanahan, 2007) and multipartnered fertility more common (Carlson and Furstenberg, 2006). Moreover, the couples in Bryant and colleagues' study were married around 1969, a time when cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing were far less common than they are today (Casper and Bianchi, 2002). This raises the question of whether the changing demographic landscape, that is, more cohabiting couples and single parents living with children, changes the potential for intergenerational ties to influence relationship stability and whether we might see differences across union types. In this paper, we extend prior research by examining how family

integration—in terms of both relationships between couples and their parents and between children and their grandparents—influences the stability of couple relationships after a birth in large U.S. cities in the late 1990s.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data

We use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal birth-cohort study with an oversample of unmarried parents, which began between 1998 and 2000. The study includes 4,897 births—3,710 unmarried and 1,187 married. The weighted sample represents nonmarital births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. Baseline interviews with mothers and fathers took place in 75 different hospitals just after the baby's birth, and follow-up interviews were conducted at 1, 3, and 5 years after the birth. Response rates were 88 percent for unmarried mothers and 75 percent for unmarried fathers at baseline; 85 percent of mothers were retained in the study by the 5th-year interview and 88 percent of fathers were interviewed at least once. In this paper, we use data from all four waves of interviews with mothers.

We limit our study to 18 cities because three out of six questions used as independent variables were not asked in Oakland and Austin in the 1-year survey (reducing the sample by 657 cases). Then, missing data on individual items across the six independent variables reduces the sample by 1,047 cases (819 of these are missing because the child's maternal or paternal grandparents were no longer living). Attrition by the fifth survey also results in the loss of 534 cases. Finally, 12 cases were missing information on relationship status or grandmother co-residence at year 1. Taken together, these selection criteria result in a final sample of  $N=2,648$  couples who had a child together in the late 1990s and who had at least one living parent at the 1-year follow-up survey. We address possible selection bias due to attrition and excluding those with deceased grandparents in the sub-section on *Robustness* in the Results section below.

### Dependent Variable

At every wave of the Fragile Families Study, mothers reported their current relationship status with the focal child's father. For our dependent variable, union stability, we coded mother's report of current union status with respect to the biological father at the 5-year follow-up into three categories of married, cohabiting, and nonresident (i.e., the two biological parents are not co-resident with each other). Cohabiters are those who report that they are living with the baby's father "all or most of the time" or "some of the time." Since there are only 46 cases (1 percent of the weighted sample) in "visiting" relationships (romantically involved but living apart), we include these in the nonresident category. Note that mothers who are not in a relationship with the biological father could potentially be involved or living with a new partner, but we do not capture such information here; our research focus is on the stability of relationships between the biological parents of the focal child.

### Independent Variables

At the 1-year survey, mothers were asked six questions about intergenerational ties. These measures reflect how well the mother gets along with her own mother and father; how well the mother gets along with the father's parents; how well the father gets along with the mother's parents; and how often the focal child sees both the maternal and paternal grandparents. Response choices for the questions asking how well mother gets along with her parents, the father's parents, and how well the father gets along with the mother's parents range from 1 to 3, where 1=*not very well*, 2=*pretty well*, and 3=*very well*; therefore, higher scores represent better-quality relationships. Mothers who reported not knowing their fathers (12 percent of sample) were included in our main analyses at the lowest level of relationship quality. In supplementary analyses, we estimated models where we included these cases by assigning them to a new category of "no relationship"; these results were consistent with our main findings. For the questions about the child's frequency of seeing their grandparents, response choices range from 1 to 5, where 1=*never*, 2=*less often*, 3=*few times/year*, 4=*few times/month*, and 5=*one or more times a week*.

We conducted factor analyses to determine if the intergenerational relationship variables could be combined in a scale or index. We found that the items did not load well together on one or even several factors. Inter-item correlations ranged from  $r=.00$  to  $r=.36$  (with 9 out of 15 below  $r=.20$ ). Alpha reliability scores for all six items, and various subsets of items, were always less than 0.5. Therefore, we treat the six items as separate measures of intergenerational relationships in our analyses.

### Covariates

We relied on prior research, particularly studies of union stability following a baby's birth using the Fragile Families data (Carlson et al., 2004; Harknett, 2008; Harknett and McLanahan, 2004), to inform our selection of control variables. All variables used in our analyses are from mothers' reports and were taken from the baseline interview, unless otherwise noted (some variables were not available until the 1-year survey). We used multiple imputation, with the *ice* command in Stata (Royston, 2004), to estimate missing values on our covariates (but not on our independent variables of interest or dependent variable); the proportion of cases missing on any covariate was always less than 10 percent, except for mother's age at first birth (12 percent), multipartnered fertility (15 percent), and religious attendance (11 percent).

With respect to our background and socioeconomic variables, mothers' age is measured in years, and we include a dummy variable of whether her first birth occurred as a teenager (under age 20). A dichotomous variable reflects whether she lived with both of her biological parents at age 15. We used four dummy variables for mothers' race/ethnicity: non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, non-Hispanic white, and non-Hispanic other race (mostly Asian and Native American). We also used a dichotomous variable for whether the mother and father were of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. We used four dummy variables for mothers' and fathers' education: less than high school, high school degree, some college, and a college degree or higher. Mothers were asked whether the father worked in the week prior to the baseline interview (dummy variable). The income-to-poverty ratio for the mother's household reflects

total household income divided by the federal poverty line based on household size; this ratio ranges from 0 to 12.5, where higher indicates greater economic resources.

Family and fertility characteristics were measured using a continuous variable for mother's parity (the number of all other children the mother has given birth to at the time of the baseline interview). Mothers' and fathers' multipartnered fertility were measured using dichotomous variables (at the 1-year survey), where 1=*had a child by another partner*.

Our relationship quality measures included a dichotomous variable for whether the mother reports that the father often or sometimes hits or slaps her when he is angry. Also, we include a measure of supportiveness in the couple relationship based on the average of four questions: whether the mother felt the father was fair and willing to compromise, whether the father showed the mother affection, whether she felt insulted by the father (reverse coded), and whether the father encouraged her ( $\alpha=.66$ ); response choices range from 1=*never* to 3=*often*, where higher scores represent a greater level of supportiveness. We also control for the number of years that the mother knew the father prior to the birth of their child.

In addition, we include a measure of positive attitudes toward marriage, based on the average of three questions: whether it is better to get married than to live together, whether it is better for children if their parents are married, and whether living together is the same as being married (reverse coded) ( $\alpha=.63$ ); responses choices range from 1=*strongly disagree* to 4=*strongly agree*, so higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward marriage. Other measures included the self-reported health status of the mother at baseline (range is 1=*poor* to 5=*excellent*) and how often the mother attends religious services at one year (range is 1=*never* to 6=*one or more times per week*).

We also control for the mother and father's relationship status at 1-year follow-up—married or cohabiting (with nonresident as the reference group). We use the 1-year status—the same time that our intergenerational relationship variables are measured—in order to more conservatively estimate how intergenerational relationships may be associated with 5-year relationship status and avoid reverse causality of baseline relationship (or change between baseline and 1 year) affecting family ties at 1 year.

Hence, our estimates are net of any effect that prior extended family relationships may have had on relationship status at year 1. We also include a dichotomous measure for whether the grandmother lived in the household at the 1-year follow-up, so that our measure of contact between the grandmother and the child does not simply reflect her living with the mother and child. Finally, in order to account for the oversampling of nonmarital births within the Fragile Families survey design, we include a dummy variable for marital status at baseline (along with race and education already noted).

### Analytic Approach

Our goal was to estimate how external family relationships (measured at the 1-year survey) are associated with couple relationship status at the 5-year follow-up interview, net of confounding covariates. Because our dependent variable has three categories (married, cohabiting, and nonresident), we used multinomial logistic regression models, where maximum likelihood estimation is used to predict the likelihood that mothers will be married or cohabiting, as compared to living away from the father, as a function of the independent variables of interest and covariates included in the models. We report the results as relative risk ratios (or  $\exp[b]$ ), which can be interpreted as—for each one-unit change in the predictor variable, the probability that a given outcome occurs, relative to the reference group, given that all variables in the model are held constant. Relative risk ratios that are greater than one indicate that the relative risk or probability of being in one group compared to another is positive. Relative risk ratios that are less than one indicate that the relative risk of being in one category compared to another is negative. In our analysis, for example, if the relative risk ratio of marriage for African Americans is .49, which can be interpreted as that the probability that a Black mother compared to a White mother will be married at 5 years (relative to being nonresident) is lower by a factor of .49, holding all other variables constant. Or, the relative risk ratio for fathers' having a college degree is 2.32, which means that the probability that a mother is married at 5 years (relative to being nonresident) is 2.3 times higher when the father has a college degree compared to when he has a high school degree or less.

We estimate two multivariate models in our main analyses. Model 1 includes our primary independent variables along with demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, as well as relationship and co-residence variables measured at year 1. Model 2 adds additional covariates that reflect the couple's fertility history, relationship quality, attitudes, and religiosity.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

We begin by describing the characteristics of our sample. Table 1 shows the weighted means and percentages for our covariates; we show figures separately by couples' relationship status at birth, since there are notable differences across groups (especially between married mothers and both categories of unmarried mothers). Married mothers are older than cohabiting mothers and those not living with the baby's father (with mean ages of 29, 25, and 23, respectively), and they are much less likely to have been a teenager at their first birth. Married mothers are more likely to have lived with both of their biological parents at age 15 and to report better health status, compared to cohabitators and nonresident mothers. Married mothers report better health and knowing the baby's father longer than cohabiting and mothers living apart from the baby's father (8.4, 4.7, and 3.5 years, respectively). Married mothers are more likely to be white (46 percent) or Hispanic (30 percent), while the majority of mothers living away from fathers are African American (64 percent); cohabitators are primarily Hispanic (44 percent) and African American (38 percent).

Educational attainment is much higher among married mothers, compared to cohabiting or mothers living apart from the fathers; 38 percent of married mothers have a college degree, compared to only 1 percent of both categories of unmarried mothers; 18 percent of married mothers lack a high school degree, compared to 37 percent of nonresident and cohabiting mothers. The figures are roughly similar for fathers' education. Married mothers have much higher income-to-poverty ratios, and married fathers were more likely to be working in the week prior to the baby's birth. Notably, about 39 percent of

**Table 1**  
**Sample Characteristics by Relationship Status at Time of Baby's Birth (N=2,648)**

	Resident		Non-Resident			
	Married (54%)	Cohabiting (21%)	Non-Resident <sup>a</sup> (25%)			
<b><i>Demographic/Background Characteristics</i></b>						
Mother's Age (mean)	29.05	(5.35)	25.05	(5.79)	22.58	(5.22)
Mother Teen at First Birth (yes/no)	18.1		49.0		53.7	
Lived w/Both Biological Parents at Age 15 (yes/no)	71.2		42.3		27.1	
Mother's Self-Reported Health (range=1-5)	4.13	(.82)	3.88	(.95)	3.83	(1.01)
Years Known Baby's Father Prior to Birth	8.36	(5.48)	4.68	(4.47)	3.53	(3.70)
<b><i>Mother's Race/Ethnicity</i></b>						
Black Non-Hispanic	12.5		37.7		64.3	
White Non-Hispanic	46.2		15.5		9.5	
Hispanic	30.3		43.7		24.1	
Other Non-Hispanic	10.9		2.8		1.9	
Father of Different Race/Ethnicity (yes/no)	10.4		12.5		18.4	
<b><i>Socioeconomic Characteristics</i></b>						
<b><i>Mother's Education</i></b>						
Less than High School	17.5		37.3		37.4	
High School	24.1		39.4		43.0	
Some College	20.5		22.4		17.0	
College Degree or Higher	37.9		.9		1.3	
<b><i>Father's Education</i></b>						
Less than High School	16.7		36.7		28.7	
High School	18.0		33.6		35.3	
Some College	24.4		21.1		21.2	
College Degree or Higher	40.0		5.5		1.4	
Mother's Income-to-Poverty Ratio (Range=0-12.5)	4.84	(3.80)	1.85	(1.68)	1.28	(1.22)
Father Worked for Pay Last Week (yes/no)	94.8		84.2		72.6	
<b><i>Household Characteristics</i></b>						
Grandmother Present in Household at 1 Year (yes/no)	10.7		16.0		39.0	
Number of Children	.99	(1.09)	1.26	(1.27)	.91	(1.33)
<b><i>Multi-Partnered Fertility</i></b>						
Mother Has Child by Prior Partner (yes/no)	12.1		38.1		33.6	
Father Has Child by Prior Partner (yes/no)	12.5		31.2		51.6	
<b><i>Relationship Quality &amp; Attitudes</i></b>						
Father Hits/Slaps When Angry (yes/no)	2.8		2.3		5.4	
Mother Feels Supported by Father (range=1-3)	2.75	(.28)	2.67	(.33)	2.47	(.46)
Mother's Positive Attitudes about Marriage (range=1-4)	3.16	(.48)	2.60	(.55)	2.67	(.56)
Mothers' Attendance at Religious Services (Range=1-6)	4.70	(1.34)	4.17	(1.42)	4.15	(1.50)

<sup>a</sup>This category includes 17% who are romantically involved but living apart and 7% who are not in a romantic relationship. Note. All figures are weighted by city sampling weights. Standard deviations shown in parentheses.

mothers who do not live with the baby's father have a grandmother who is present in the home compared to 16 percent of cohabitators and 11 percent of mothers who are married. While the average number of prior children is similar across groups, cohabiting and nonresident parents were much more likely to have a child by a prior partner compared to married parents. Physical violence is low across all groups, with higher prevalence among mothers living away from the baby's father. Supportiveness in the couple relationships does not notably differ across groups. Attitudes toward marriage are, not surprisingly, more positive among women who were married at the focal child's birth. Religious attendance is slightly higher among married mothers compared to both categories of unmarried mothers. We examined colinearity among our covariates and primary independent variables and found that no correlation was above  $r=.56$  (with the exception of mother's and father's college, with  $r=.61$ ).

Table 2 shows means and percentages for our six intergenerational relationship variables from the 1-year survey separated by couple relationship status at the time of birth. (Note that the patterns are similar if we use relationship status at the 1-year survey.) Most mothers report getting along "very well" with their mothers regardless of relationship status, but the figure is 15 percentage points higher for married compared to nonresident mothers. Fifty-seven percent of married mothers report getting along with their fathers "very well" compared to 50 percent of cohabiting mothers and 38 percent of nonresident mothers. This pattern generally persists when we look at how well mothers and fathers get along with each other's parents. On the other hand, when we look at how often children spend time with their maternal grandparents, the pattern changes: 75 percent of children whose parents are living apart see their maternal grandparents once or more per week, compared to 45 percent for those with married parents and 65 percent with cohabiting parents. The frequency of contact with paternal grandparents is lower across all groups: regardless of relationship status, less than 50 percent report that their child sees their paternal grandparents one or more times per week. Moreover, 28 percent of children with nonresident parents "never" see their paternal grandparents compared to a mere 3 percent in the same category for maternal

**Table 2**  
**Means and Percentages for Intergenerational Relationships among Couples at One-Year Follow-up (N=2,648)**

	Married		Cohabiting		Non-Resident	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>	%
Mother gets along with her mother (1-3)	2.75 (.79)		2.64 (.63)		2.51 (.70)	
Not well		3.2		8.1		12.2
Pretty well		18.5		20.1		24.6
Very well		78.3		71.9		63.1
Mother gets along with her father (1-3)	2.37 (.79)		2.22 (.85)		2.04 (.85)	
Not well		19.6		27.6		34.1
Pretty well		23.6		22.8		28.0
Very well		56.8		49.6		37.9
Father gets along with mother's parents (1-3)	2.60 (.60)		2.34 (.80)		2.01 (.85)	
Not well		5.7		20.4		35.1
Pretty well		28.9		24.9		28.5
Very well		65.4		54.7		36.4
Mother gets along with father's parents (1-3)	2.51 (.68)		2.46 (.76)		2.09 (.84)	
Not well		10.9		16.1		31.4
Pretty well		27.7		22.2		28.3
Very well		61.5		61.7		40.4
How often child sees mother's parents (1-5)	3.81 (1.36)		4.20 (1.30)		4.55 (.92)	
Never		12.2		8.5		3.0
Less often than few times/year		2.6		5.5		1.2
Few times/year		22.2		9.2		8.2
Few times/month		18.0		11.7		12.5
Once or more/week		45.1		65.1		75.1
How often child sees father's parents (1-5)	3.56 (1.33)		3.78 (1.50)		3.23 (1.60)	
Never		12.9		15.8		28.4
Less often than few times/year		3.6		6.6		3.7
Few times/year		32.3		10.5		14.1
Few times/month		17.2		18.5		23.4
Once or more/week		34.1		48.6		30.4

**Note:** All figures are weighted by city sampling weights. Standard deviations shown in parentheses.

grandparents. It is striking that the children of unmarried parents see both their paternal and maternal grandparents more frequently than children of married parents.

Since our focus is on relationship stability, next, we describe the stability and change in parents' relationship status from the time of birth to the 5-year follow-up survey. These figures differ from other studies using the Fragile Families data, since we limit our sample to those cases with valid information on the family relationship variables at the 1-year survey. Table 3 shows that 84 percent of those who were married at baseline remained married by the 5-year follow-up, and 16 percent had separated or divorced. Among cohabiting couples at birth, 58 percent were still together at the 5-year survey—27 percent had gotten married, and 31 percent were still cohabiting, whereas 42 percent were no longer living together. Among couples living apart at baseline, 6 percent had gotten married, and 16 percent had moved in together, while the majority (78 percent) was still living apart.

### Multivariate Analyses

Table 4 reports the results from our multinomial logit models predicting couple relationship status as a function of our intergenerational relationship variables (and covariates); the reference category is living apart from the baby's father at 5 years. As shown in Model 1, the quality of relationship between mothers and their own father does not appear to have a significant association with couples' relationship status 5 years after a baby's birth. The quality of mothers' relationships with their own mothers is also not a strong predictor of relationship stability—there is a marginally significant positive association with closer relationships and the probability of cohabiting (versus living apart) in Model 1, but this estimate is no longer significant in Model 2.

By contrast, the degree to which the father gets along with the maternal grandparents shows a strong and positive association with the likelihood that the couple is married at the 5-year survey. Even in Model 2, which includes couple relationship quality at the time of the baby's birth, each "unit" of closeness between the father and the maternal grandparents is associated with a 42 percent greater

**Table 3**  
**Relationship Status at Baby's Birth and Five Years Later**  
**(N=2,648)**

Time of Birth	Five Years after Birth of Child (percent of row)			Number of Cases ( <i>n</i> ) (100%)
	Married (53%)	Cohabiting (11%)	Non-Resident <sup>a</sup> (36%)	
Married (54%)	84%	0%	16%	653
Cohabiting (21%)	27%	31%	42%	924
Non-resident (25%) <sup>a</sup>	6%	16%	78%	1,071
Number of cases ( <i>n</i> )	832	377	1,439	2,648

Percentages are weighted by city sampling weights. Numbers of cases (*n*'s) are unweighted.

<sup>a</sup>Non-resident cases at the time of birth include 17% in visiting relationships and 7% not romantically involved; at five years, only 1% are in visiting relationships, and 35% are not romantically involved.

**Table 4**  
**Results from Multinomial Logit Models (Relative Risk Ratios): Parents' Relationship Status about Five Years after**  
**Baby's Birth by Intergenerational Relationships (N=2,648)**

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Married	Cohabiting	Married	Cohabiting
<b>Family Integration</b>				
Mother gets along with her father (Range=1-3)	.96	.88	.94	.87
Mother gets along with her mother (Range=1-3)	1.18	1.24+	1.16	1.24
Father gets along with mother's parents (Range=1-3)	1.52***	1.15	1.42**	1.14
Mother gets along with father's parents (Range=1-3)	1.03	1.02	1.01	1.03
How often child sees mother's parents (Range=1-5)	.81**	.88*	.83**	.89
How often child sees father's parents (Range=1-5)	1.07	1.17**	1.05	1.14*
<b>Demographic/Background Characteristics</b>				
Mother's Age	1.02	1.05**	1.03	1.07**
Mother Teen at First Birth (yes/no)	.84	.91	.86	.95
Lived w/Both Biological Parents at 15 (yes/no)	1.21	1.48**	1.21	1.47*
Mother's Health (Range=1-5)	.97	.97	.95	.97
Years Known Baby's Father Prior to Birth	1.01	1.04**	1.01	1.04*
Mother's Race/Ethnicity (reference=Non-Hispanic White)				
Black Non-Hispanic	.49***	.79	.48***	.88
Hispanic	.99	1.40	.94	1.44
Other Non-Hispanic	1.39	3.03*	1.31	3.03*
Father of Different Race/Ethnicity (yes/no)	.76	.80	.83	.80
<b>Socioeconomic Characteristics</b>				
Mother's Education (reference=less than HS)				
High School	1.00	1.13	.99	1.17
Some College	.94	.88	.91	.89
College Degree or Higher	1.30	1.26	1.16	1.32
Father's Education (reference=less than HS)				
High School	1.09	.89	1.01	.89
Some College	1.50*	1.01	1.39	1.03
College Degree or Higher	2.32**	.60	2.09*	.58
Mother's Income/Poverty Ratio (Range=0-12.5)	1.09*	.90*	1.08*	.89*
Father Worked for Pay Last Week (yes/no)	1.15	.94	1.10	.93
<b>Household Characteristics</b>				
Total Number of Children	1.04	.85*	1.04	.88+
Grandmother Present in Household at 1 Year (yes/no)	1.05	1.14	.97	1.06
<b>Multi-Partnered Fertility</b>				
Mother Has Child by Prior Partner (yes/no)			1.00	.78
Father Has Child by Prior Partner (yes/no)			.73*	.71*
<b>Relationship Quality &amp; Attitudes</b>				
Father Hits/Slaps When Angry (yes/no)			1.11	1.06
Mother Feels Supported by Father (Range=1-3)			2.45***	.97
Mother-Positive Attitudes about Marriage (Range=1-4)			1.17	.87
Attendance at Religious Services (Range=1-6)			1.16**	.95

+\* $p \leq .10$  \*\* $p \leq .05$  \*\*\* $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*\* $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed tests)

**Note:** Reference category is parents living apart from one another at the 5-year survey.

probability that the couple is married versus living apart 5 years later. The same pattern does not hold for mothers' relationships with the paternal grandparents: there is essentially no association between the quality of relationship between the mother and the fathers' parents and union stability.

Turning to the frequency of contact between the child and his or her grandparents, we find that—contrary to our expectations—the child's more frequent interaction with maternal grandparents significantly decreases the probability that the couple is married (.81) or cohabiting (.88) compared to being nonresident (Model 1). Once we include measures of fertility history, attitudes, religiosity, and couple relationship quality in Model 2, the estimate is no longer statistically significant with respect to cohabitation, but more frequent contact between children and maternal grandparents is associated with a significantly lower likelihood of marriage. With respect to children's contact with paternal grandparents, we find that more frequent contact is positively associated with the probability that couples are cohabiting 5 years after their child's birth (1.14 times higher in Model 2). The associations with marriage are in a positive direction but are not statistically significant.

In short, in our primary analyses, with one important exception, we find support for the hypothesis that stronger intergenerational ties positively influence union stability among couples who have a child together; this is especially true for extended family relationships with respect to the biological father. In particular, when fathers have good relationships with the maternal grandparents, and when the focal child spends more time with the father's parents, couples are significantly more likely to stay together than to break up. These findings hold in random and fixed effects models, which we discuss in the section on *Robustness* below.

In order to investigate possible differences by race/ethnicity, we ran our multinomial logit models separately for whites, blacks, and Hispanics. The patterns are mostly similar, although the coefficients are sometimes not statistically significant (because of smaller cell sizes). With respect to marriage at 5 years, one notable difference by race is that the child seeing the maternal grandparents is not salient for blacks (while it is for whites and Hispanics). With respect to cohabitation at 5 years, the negative coefficient for

the child's seeing the mother's parents is only significant for Hispanics, whereas it is positive (and marginally significant) for blacks and close to zero (and insignificant) for whites. Differences in the intergenerational ties (and the consequences of such) by race/ethnicity is an important topic for future research.

Our primary analytic focus in this paper is the influence of intergenerational relationships on union stability, but we briefly summarize how the covariates are associated with union stability. Older age, living with both biological parents at age 15, and knowing the father longer are all significantly associated with a higher probability of cohabitation (but not marriage), as compared to living apart. Consistent with prior research, we find that race and socioeconomic factors significantly influence the stability of unions for couples with children. Black mothers are significantly less likely to be married 5 years after a baby's birth. Also, fathers' having a college degree is associated with a higher probability of marriage. Income is positively associated with marriage, while higher income diminishes the likelihood of cohabitation (compared to breaking up). Mothers with a greater number of children are less likely to be cohabiting, and fathers' having prior children is associated with a lower likelihood of both marriage and cohabitation. Greater supportiveness in the couple relationship and more frequent religious attendance are both positively linked to the likelihood of being married—but not cohabiting—at 5 years after the focal child's birth.

### Robustness

We conducted several additional analyses in order to evaluate the robustness of our findings. First, we were concerned with whether the intergenerational relationship measures can reasonably be considered to have causal effects on union stability, or whether these variables might simply be a proxy for some other omitted variable(s). In other words, does greater family integration (particularly the strength of intergenerational ties between the father and the maternal grandparents, and the frequency of interaction between the child and their paternal grandparents) affect the stability of the focal couple's

relationship by integrating them within a family network and reducing uncertainty about their partner choice, as theory would suggest? Or, do these intergenerational ties simply reflect unobserved heterogeneity across couples, such as commitment to or values about family ties more generally, or a decision to live proximate to family members such that frequent interaction is possible in the first place, or a temperament that facilitates positive relationships, or a respect for elders in the role of children's lives?

To better address issues of selectivity, we estimated random effects and fixed effects models using data on intergenerational relationships and union stability at both years 1 and 5; we created a dichotomous variable to indicate the couple is in a co-resident relationship at each year (married or cohabiting). These models take advantage of the longitudinal design of the data, using repeated observations pooled over time. The random effects models allow us to examine the relationship between intergenerational relationships and union stability, capturing variation both between and within subjects. The fixed effects models utilize only within-subject variation and reflect how changes in intergenerational ties are associated with changes in union stability. This more conservative technique reduces bias in the estimates by controlling for unobserved individual characteristics that do not change over time and that may be associated with both intergenerational relationships and union stability (Greene, 2003; Snijders, 2005).

Results from our random and fixed effects models are shown in Table 5. For comparison purposes, we first ran a logistic regression model (with a dichotomous dependent variable for married or cohabiting versus nonresident) that includes all of our covariates. These results are consistent with our multinomial logit results reported in Table 4 (but combine marriage and cohabitation into a single outcome): fathers' getting along with mothers' parents, and the child's seeing the paternal grandparents, are associated with greater union stability, while the child's seeing the maternal grandparents is associated with less stability. Yet, one additional significant estimate is noted—mothers' getting along with fathers' parents is associated with greater stability. A nearly identical pattern of results is found in the random

**Table 5**  
**Results from Logit, Random, and Fixed Effects Models (Odds Ratios): Being in a Co-Resident Relationship Five Years after Baby's Birth by Intergenerational Relationships at One Year**

	Logit	Random Effects	Fixed Effects <sup>a</sup>
<b>Family Integration</b>			
Mother gets along with her parents	.84+	.84+	.87
Father gets along with mother's parents	2.09***	2.10***	2.15***
Mother gets along with father's parents	1.17*	1.17*	1.38*
How often child sees mother's parents	.82***	.82***	1.11
How often child sees father's parents	1.25***	1.24***	1.65***
<i>N</i>	2,648	2,648	2,648

+ $p \leq .10$  \* $p \leq .05$  \*\* $p \leq .01$  \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

**Note:** Logit and Random Effects models are from pooled sample and include all covariates in Model 2 in Table 4. Fixed effects models include only family integration and union status.

<sup>a</sup>Only cases that change on the independent and dependent variables between years 1 and 5 contribute to the estimate ( $n=483$ ).

effects models, which account for both within- and between-group variation: none of the estimates change in magnitude beyond .01 units, and the statistical significance remains the same.

Finally, the fixed effect results show that even when unobserved characteristics that are fixed across individuals are held constant (by focusing on only within-subject change), positive changes in relationships between fathers and maternal grandparents—and increased contact between children and paternal grandparents—increase the likelihood that couples will stay together. The fact that the point estimates become even larger than in the logit or random effects models suggests that there is some negative selection, that is, unobserved variables are masking the true relationship between these intergenerational ties and union stability. Also, the point estimate for mothers getting along with their own parents becomes slightly larger as well, suggesting that net of time-invariant selection factors, mothers' developing closer relationships with their parents is associated with a greater likelihood of breaking up.

With respect to our prior puzzling finding that children's spending more time with mothers' parents is associated with a greater chance of couples' breaking up, here we note that the sign changes to positive, and the estimate is no longer statistically significant. This suggests that the original negative association between contact with maternal grandparents and union instability may be due to some selection factor(s) that are correlated with both frequency of child-grandparent contact and union stability; once individual characteristics are held constant, we no longer observe this unexpected relationship. Overall, results from our additional models shown in Table 5 support our main findings reported in Table 4 about fathers' extended family ties—and provide useful information about mothers' extended family ties.

In addition to the robustness analyses discussed here, we also estimated Cox proportional hazard models to determine whether intergenerational ties were associated with the duration of couple relationships—a more sensitive specification of the dependent variable. The pattern of results was again

very similar to the other findings reported. However, the significant amount of missing data on dates of union formation and dissolution gave us pause about relying on these results.

Finally, we conducted descriptive analyses to examine two possible sources of sample selection bias: (1) cases excluded where parents reported their parents were deceased; and (2) cases lost due to attrition from the survey. To do this, we examined the baseline characteristics of those who were not included in our final sample, compared to cases that remained in the final sample. The death of parents (or in-laws) of mothers in their twenties points to the possibility of greater disadvantage among the excluded cases, including serious parental health problems and/or deaths due to violence, accidents, or other unnatural causes. Comparisons of the cases whose parent(s) had died versus those included in our sample show that excluded cases were slightly older and more likely to be African American compared to our sample. Also, among the excluded cases, both parents had less education, fewer fathers worked, and the household income-to-poverty ratio was lower. Both mothers and fathers were more likely to have had children with other partners. Fewer respondents who had a deceased parent were married at the time of birth, they were more likely to have children with other partners, and the excluded cases were in slightly worse health. There were small differences in levels of baseline relationship quality, number of years the parents had known each other, and religious attendance between the included cases and those where the parents were deceased. Overall, the differences were modest.

We found similar patterns comparing those who attrited from the study by the 5th year to those who remained in the study. Overall, the cases lost to attrition were more likely to be minorities and have lower socioeconomic resources than those who remained in the study, but it is not clear the extent to which this may bias our results. The fact that, as noted earlier, our main findings are mostly similar when we run our models separately by race (results not shown) gives us some confidence that are results are not strongly biased as a result of our sample selection.

## DISCUSSION

This study provides new information about the important role of external family ties for the stability of relationships among couples who had an urban birth in the late 1990s. While most studies of union stability have emphasized individual- or couple-level factors, our research suggests that intergenerational kin ties play a significant role in shaping what happens to families with a new child. This study gives credence to the long-argued notion that social integration is an important predictor of individual-level outcomes—something Durkheim noted decades ago.

A small body of prior research has suggested that friends and family play an important role in relationship outcomes for college students and long-term married couples (Sprecher and Felmlee, 1992; Bryant and Conger, 1999; Bryant et al., 2001). We find evidence that positive family relationships among both married and unmarried couples who have a child together significantly improve the probability that these couples will stay together in the first 5 years of their child's lives. The results are robust to controls for a number of factors previously shown to influence union stability, such as relationship quality and attitudes, socioeconomic characteristics, and family and fertility characteristics.

The salience of fathers' family integration and its influence on couple outcomes is particularly striking in our findings. Our results show that the relationship between mothers and their own parents does not significantly increase the probability that couples stayed together by the time their children were age 5. On the other hand, fathers' getting along well with mothers' parents had the largest association (among the intergenerational relationship predictors) with couples' stability (with respect to marriage), followed by the focal child spending time with the paternal grandparents (with respect to cohabitation). This result is consistent with Stack's (1974) argument that when fathers are well-liked by mothers' families, the relationship stands a better chance of surviving compared to when these relationships are not amiable.

As noted previously, we did not expect to find a negative association between how often the focal child spends time with their maternal grandparents and union stability. We expected that time spent with

both sets of grandparents would have similar effects, promoting couples' greater union stability. However, in our main models, greater time spent with mothers' parents is shown to significantly *decrease* the probability that couples stayed together 5 years after their children's birth, even when we controlled for grandmother co-residence in households (and other factors). Although this finding appears counter-intuitive, research shows that maternal grandparents often provide child care in low-income families and in some cases are substitutes in the absence of one or both biological parents (Jendrek, 1993; Pruchno, 1999; Uttal, 1999).

In other analyses not shown (and available upon request), we controlled for whether the grandmother provided child care for the focal child, but the negative association persisted. It is possible that children's frequency of contact with mothers' parents is fundamentally different from children's contact with fathers' parents. Perhaps children spend more time with mothers' parents when fathers are less involved, so grandparents are assuming some or all of his responsibilities—something mothers may not characterize as child care. In addition, children spending more time with mothers' parents may signal greater relationship hardship for the couple—something our child care measure does not capture, so it could be reverse causality: when couple relationships are unstable, maternal grandparents take more responsibility for children. The change of sign on this variable in our fixed effects model and the lack of statistical significance suggest that selection is a problem in our earlier estimate—some unobservable characteristic is associated with both the grandmother seeing the child and couple union stability. This topic is worth further exploration in future research.

We observe that different aspects of intergenerational ties influence marriage versus cohabitation—fathers' getting along with the mother's parents is positively linked to marriage, while the child's seeing the fathers' parents is positively linked with cohabitation. Not surprisingly, race, education, relationship quality, fertility history, and religiosity all contribute to the story of union stability among married and unmarried couples with children, particularly as concerns marriage; these findings are generally consistent with prior research.

A key question is whether stronger intergenerational relationships are, in fact, what holds couples together, or whether couples with high extended-family integration are characteristically different from couples that are likely to break up. Our fixed effects models offer the most rigorous test of causality, since they rely on only within-subject change and control for time-invariant individual characteristics. Yet, these models do not account for unmeasured time-varying characteristics, so our results could still be biased by variables correlated with both intergenerational relationships and union stability that are changing over the observation period. Also, these models do not account for the potential reciprocal nature of the association between union stability and family ties (i.e., that couples in long-term stable unions are more likely to generate better intergenerational relationships); we know that intergenerational relationships change as union stability changes, but we cannot determine the direction of the association. Thus, we remain cautious in the interpretation of our findings.

Analyses of missing data do not point to serious selection bias with our sample compared to the larger sample of parents at the time of birth in the Fragile Families Study, as we observed relatively minor differences between our sample and the excluded cases. At the same time, it is important to note that our sample is drawn from a study of urban births. The average age of mothers is fairly young—early to late twenties, so our results cannot be generalized to older parents with children. Also, our results are not necessarily salient to couples without children or to couples with children living in rural or suburban areas.

Despite limitations and unexpected findings, this study adds to our understanding of union stability among unmarried couples with children by examining the role of external, extended-family relationships. Given the high instability in couple relationships after a nonmarital birth and the deleterious effects of multiple transitions on children (Fomby and Cherlin, 2007; Osborne and McLanahan, 2007), understanding what keeps couples together is an important area of concern. Future research should continue to examine the role of extended family ties in couple-level outcomes with particular emphasis on fathers and their relationships with mothers' families. Exploration of the characteristics that distinguish

fathers who are—and who are not—well-integrated into mothers' families would be a reasonable place to start.



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