ECOLOGICAL AND FAMILY SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVES
ON COPARENTING DURING ADOLESCENCE

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by
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ABSTRACT

A fundamental family systems relationship, coparenting, is defined by the ways in which parental figures work together in their parenting roles. Prior research demonstrates that coparenting is susceptible to developmental transitions that bring about changes in family roles and relationships. However, longitudinal research on coparenting during later phases of family life, when family circumstances and offspring’s adolescent development pose new sets of challenges for mothers and fathers, is far more limited. The goal of this dissertation was to explore questions about how changes in coparenting are linked to adolescent development, and the dynamic links with individual adjustment, family processes, and the broader social and cultural context in which families are embedded. Multiple methods were used to examine longitudinal changes in coparenting in separate ethnic-homogenous samples of two-parent families with adolescent offspring.

The goal of the first study was to chart the trajectory of coparenting satisfaction as a function of marital duration in 155 two-parent African American families, and to examine the links between marital characteristics and changes in coparenting satisfaction over time. Multilevel growth curve models revealed an inverted-U quadratic pattern of change in coparenting satisfaction across the first two decades of marriage for both mothers and fathers, but this effect was qualified by youth age, such that the quadratic pattern was evident in families with older but not younger offspring. Increases in marital love were linked to increases in coparenting satisfaction, increases in marital conflict were associated with declines in coparenting satisfaction, and these links were stronger for fathers than to mothers.

Using the same sample of two-parent African American families, study two described changes in coparenting satisfaction as a function of offspring age, and examined the role of sociocultural stressors (economic strain, racial discrimination) and supports (socio-economic resources, religiosity) for coparenting satisfaction over time. Multilevel growth curve analyses revealed that changes in coparenting satisfaction differed for mothers and fathers: Mothers were less satisfied on average but showed no change over time whereas fathers experienced a linear decline, becoming less satisfied with coparenting over the course of youth’s adolescent development. Findings were generally consistent with hypotheses.
that stressors were negatively linked and religiosity was positively related to coparenting satisfaction. Findings for racial discrimination and income differed by parent and highlighted gender dynamics within couple relationships.

Study three examined two dimensions of coparenting in two-parent European American families of adolescents -- shared decision-making and shared time with offspring -- and assessed the bidirectional associations between dimensions of coparenting and boys’ and girls’ risky behaviors and depressive symptoms across four time points (six years) of adolescent development. Across adolescence, parents of boys made more decisions together than parents of girls, and shared triadic time occurred relatively infrequently for all families. Parents’ shared decision-making was linked to fewer risky behavior problems for boys one year later, and boys’ and girls’ risky behavior problems were linked to lower shared decision-making one year later; there were no significant links between shared decision making and depressive symptoms. Coparents’ shared time with offspring was bidirectionally related to both risky behaviors and depressive symptoms, and these links were present earlier in adolescence for girls’ than for boys.

These studies confirm that evaluations of coparenting are susceptible to changes that coincide with offspring’s adolescence, and results elucidated some of the family and sociocultural factors that contribute to mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting satisfaction. Findings also suggest that dimensions of coparenting practices had distinct implications for boys’ and girls’ adjustment at different points in adolescence. Discussions center on coparenting as a fundamental family systems dynamic and suggest future directions for research on coparenting during adolescence.
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Chapter 1.

Introduction

This project integrates theory and empirical findings to explore questions about how changes in the family system are linked to adolescent development, and the dynamic links with individual adjustment, family processes, and the broader social and cultural context in which families are embedded. Adolescence is a period of change in families, when youth become increasingly autonomous and when mothers and fathers adapt to changes in their offspring and in their family roles. A family systems perspective directs attention to the implications of individuals’ developmental transitions for family dynamics. Consistent with systems tenets, a body of empirical research documents that both parent-child and marital relationship qualities evolve over the course of adolescent development. For example, parent-child intimacy declines from early to mid-adolescence, and conflict between parents and offspring increases during this time (e.g., Shanahan, McHale, Osgood, & Crouter, 2007). A separate line of research suggests that marital quality follows a cubic pattern of change, with declines beginning around 9-10 years into marriage (Kurdek, 1999; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007); this work implies that normative changes in marriage may coincide with parents’ experiences of their offspring’s adolescent transitions.

Virtually all research on family dynamics during adolescence has focused on dyadic family relationships. In contrast, coparenting, which refers to “how parents coordinate their parenting, support or undermine each other, and manage conflict regarding child-rearing” (Feinberg & Kan, 2008, p. 253), is an inherently triadic construct, one that reflects experiences and characteristics of mother, father, and child. As a family dynamic that emerges at the transition to parenthood, most coparenting research has tended to focus on the early years of children’s lives (e.g., Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004). This work demonstrates that coparenting is susceptible to developmental transitions that bring about changes in family roles and relationships. In contrast, however, we know very little about mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting activities during the period of dramatic individual change that characterizes
offspring’s adolescence. We contend that parents work to renegotiate their shared parenting strategies and get back on the same page in terms of coparenting during this time, and as such, is an important period to study.

**Dyadic Relationship Qualities and Coparenting Change**

Parents’ individual characteristics and features of their marital relationship have been shown to contribute to coparenting processes (e.g., Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). Although coparenting is distinct from dyadic family processes, prior research shows that coparenting is related to marital relationship qualities (e.g., Margolin et al., 2001), and that coparenting can be positive even in the face of marital problems (e.g., McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). Existing longitudinal research demonstrates longitudinal links between characteristics of marital relationships and coparenting dynamics in White families with young children (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). Less well understood, however, is the manner in which marital qualities and coparenting processes change during adolescence. Further, there is virtually no research on how these processes unfold in ethnic minority families. Extending what is known about “normative” family dynamics in an understudied population, Study 1 focuses on African American couples who were raising adolescents, to examine the longitudinal links between qualities of parents’ marriages and mothers’ and fathers’ satisfaction with their coparenting relationship.

We also extended prior research on coparenting to examine the potential role of gender role attitudes, a feature of families that may be especially relevant to couple relationship dynamics in African American families. Compared to other racial-ethnic groups, African American men have been shown to be more traditional in their attitudes towards childrearing roles, but African American women, more egalitarian (Kane, 2000). In addition to mothers’ and fathers’ individual gender role attitudes, research on marital relationships documents the role of shared attitudes and values on marital interactions and satisfaction (Deal, Smith, Wampler, & Halverson, 1992; Braiker & Kelley, 1979). While know little about the gender role attitudes of African American couples, some prior research on White families shows that incongruence between partners’ attitudes—such that one partner holds more traditional and the other holds more equalitarian attitudes—is linked to poorer marital relationship quality (Bowen & Orthner, 1983).
Extending this line of study to the coparenting domain would illuminate the family conditions under which effective coparenting emerges.

**The Role of Sociocultural Factors for Changes in Coparenting**

Consistent with tenet that the family is an open system, an ecological perspective highlights the role of the larger sociocultural context in family dynamics. Within this tradition, cultural ecological researchers have identified the unique stressors and supports that operate on contemporary ethnic minority families in the US. Research on coparenting has been largely confined to White, middle class families, and thus, expanding the scope of study to examine the role of socio-cultural factors in this fundamental family dynamic is an important research direction.

The adolescent transition is a time that brings new challenges to the family, as increasing autonomy and independence may be a source of tension for parents as they learn to renegotiate their coparenting roles. As noted, few studies have examined coparenting in families with adolescents, and as a result, the importance of this dynamic during a potentially stressful period is unclear. Extant research also shows that African American families may be especially at risk for sociocultural stressors, including discrimination and economic marginalization. From the perspective of family stress theory, which proposes that experiences of adversity interfere with the quality of family interactions, stressors pervade family functioning and have negative implications for relationship qualities (e.g., Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger et al., 2002). At the same time, socioeconomic resources and cultural values, including racial identity and religious involvement, have been identified as protective factors for other family processes (e.g., Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996), and as such, may play a protective role and support the development of positive family dynamics and parenting practices. To illuminate the implications of sociocultural factors for coparenting in African American families of adolescent offspring, Study 2 examines the trajectory of change in coparenting satisfaction, and the sociocultural stressors and supports that may undermine or support positive coparenting interactions during a potentially challenging time in development.

**Bidirectional Linkages between Coparenting and Adolescent Adjustment**
Adolescence is a time that brings new sets of challenges to the family, as rates of behavior problems increase and youth seek more autonomy and independence, which may require parents to renegotiate their parenting strategies. The coparenting dynamics that are important in families of adolescents are unclear from current research, although scholars are becoming increasingly aware that the processes involved in coparenting adolescent offspring may be different in some ways from the coparenting activities that are relevant in families of young children (Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007; Margolin et al., 2001). In line with this recognition, one study demonstrates that coparenting pre-school children required more frequent coordinated parenting from mothers and fathers, compared to coparenting in families with pre-adolescent aged children (Margolin et al., 2001).

A family systems perspective draws attention to the idea that family subsystems, including coparenting, and individual and dyadic relationships, are interrelated and mutually influential. Contemporary research on coparenting tends to focus on the implications of coparenting for children’s well-being, with findings that coparenting support and low coparent conflict is linked to positive child adjustment across multiple dimensions (e.g., Feinberg et al., 2007). Given the systems principle that children are agents in the family and have an active role in parenting processes and that family processes become more reciprocal during adolescence, (Floyd, Gilliom, & Costigan, 1998), we predicted that adolescents’ individual characteristics and behaviors should play a role in coparenting processes. Indeed, some longitudinal research illuminates the influence of adolescent behavior on marital relationship qualities and parenting practices (Cole, 2003; Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Schermerhorn, Cummings, DeCarlo, & Davies, 2007). One study provides evidence for reciprocity between adolescent behaviors and marital relationship and coparenting problems, further demonstrating that these dynamics are interwoven in the family system (Cui, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007). Expanding the scope of this literature to coparenting, Study 3 illuminates coparenting dynamics that are important for families of adolescent offspring, and examines the bidirectional influences between adolescent behavior problems and mothers and fathers’ coparenting success.
The overarching goal of this dissertation is to advance understanding of the family systems processes and social ecology of coparenting—a fundamental family dynamic. The three proposed papers that comprise the dissertation will address distinct goals but together are aimed at charting the course of coparenting across adolescence, an understudied developmental period and examining the role of socio-cultural processes, dyadic family relationships and individual characteristics in coparenting dynamics. The first paper is designed to illuminate the longitudinal links between marital qualities and coparenting satisfaction through the second decade of couple relationships in African American families. Paper two takes an ecological approach to examine the sociocultural stressors and supports that may explain African American parents’ coparenting satisfaction during their offspring’s transition through adolescence. The third paper illuminates bidirectional linkages between two dimensions of coparenting – which may be especially relevant in families of adolescent offspring – and adolescent adjustment.
Chapter 2.

The Development of Coparenting Satisfaction in African American Families: Links to Marital Qualities and the Role of Shared Childrearing Attitudes

Abstract

Grounded in a family systems perspective, this study charted the longitudinal trajectory of coparenting satisfaction through the first and second decades of marriage and examined the links between marital characteristics and changes in coparenting satisfaction over time. Participants were 155 African American mother-father dyads with pre-to late-adolescent-age offspring. Multilevel growth curve models revealed an inverted-U quadratic pattern of change in coparenting satisfaction across the first two decades of marriage for both mothers and fathers, but this effect was qualified by youth age, such that the quadratic pattern was evident in families with older but not younger offspring. Controlling for cross-time averages in marital qualities, increases in marital love were linked to increases in coparenting satisfaction, increases in marital conflict were associated with declines in coparenting satisfaction, and these links were stronger for fathers than to mothers. Inter-parental incongruence in childrearing attitudes was related to lower coparenting satisfaction, and couples with more incongruent attitudes and less marital love were significantly less satisfied with coparenting than other couples. Discussion centers on changes in coparenting across time and linkages between family processes.
A fundamental family systems relationship, coparenting, has been defined as the ways in which parental figures work together in their parenting roles (Feinberg, 2003). A key tenet of family systems theory is that family relationships are dynamic over time and are affected by developmental transitions of individual family members. Coparenting research has focused on developments early in the family life cycle, and this work demonstrates that parents’ evaluations of coparenting change during the transition to parenthood and across early childhood (e.g., Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004). However, longitudinal research on parents’ satisfaction with coparenting during later phases of family life, when family circumstances and offspring’s adolescent development pose new sets of challenges for mothers and fathers, is far more limited. Another principle of family systems theory is that family members are interdependent, and that changes in one relationship are connected to changes in others. Past research documents that coparenting and characteristics of marital relationships such as love and conflict are closely related, but separate constructs (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). These family processes continue to develop over time, and thus, understanding how changes in marital qualities correspond to changes in coparenting satisfaction across the course of marriage is an important step for research on coparenting.

Gendered attitudes toward childrearing may be an important factor in coparenting satisfaction, and marital qualities, more generally, as these reflect mothers’ and fathers’ beliefs about (shared) parental roles. Social exchange theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and models of interpersonal attraction (Huston & Levinger, 1978) direct attention to the significance of partner attitude congruence, and hold that partners who share similar attitudes enjoy better relationship qualities. Given that being on the same page – including agreeing on childrearing roles – is an essential component to coparenting, when mothers and fathers have similar attitudes about the gendered division of childrearing roles, they also are likely to express higher levels of coparenting satisfaction. In contrast, incongruent attitudes could put coparenting satisfaction at risk.

Whereas most coparenting research has focused on White, two-parent families, a cultural ecological perspective highlights the significance of the socio-cultural context for family systems
dynamics. Working from this perspective, scholars have called for more research on coparenting within racial-ethnic minority groups (e.g., Feinberg, 2002; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004); however our knowledge of normative coparenting processes among non-White mothers and fathers remains limited. There is a small body of research on single African American mothers and non-marital coparenting figures, such as grandparents (Dorsey, Forehand, & Brody, 2007; Jones, Shaffer, Forehand, Brody, & Armistead, 2003; Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, Foster, & Brody, 2005), but it is likely that inter-generational coparenting differs in important ways from marital coparenting. Expanding the scope of coparenting research to married African American mother-father dyads, the goals of this study were threefold. Our first goal was to chart changes in mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting satisfaction across the first and second decades of marriage in African American families. Here, we tested whether changes in coparenting satisfaction differed for mothers versus fathers, and we also tested whether they varied as a function of offspring’s developmental status by studying families in which youth ranged in age from pre- to mid- adolescence. Our second goal was to examine the implications of changes in marital love and marital conflict for corresponding changes in coparenting satisfaction. Finally, building on research on attitude congruence and marital qualities, our third goal was to examine the role of inter-parental congruence in childrearing attitudes for coparenting satisfaction, including whether attitude incongruence moderated the links between marital love and conflict and coparenting satisfaction.

**Developmental Transitions and the Family System**

A cornerstone of family systems theory is the idea that relationships change over time and are affected by developmental transitions of family members. For example, both European American and African American parents report lower marital satisfaction and more frequent marital conflict after the transition to parenthood compared to before (Crohan, 1996). Changes in marital qualities from before to after becoming parents were evident even among couples whose marital satisfaction was high prior to parenthood (for a review see Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Less research has examined changes in marital qualities later in the family life cycle, but one study by Whiteman and colleagues (2007) showed declines in marital satisfaction and love through the second
decade of marriage in European American families. Interestingly, declines were partially explained by offspring’s pubertal transitions, and suggested that the developmental changes of adolescence had negative implications for the marital relationship. This work adds to the literature showing that pubertal development also can have negative implications for parent-child relationships (see Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991 for a review) in suggesting that adolescence can be disruptive for family relationships.

Research on the developmental trajectory of coparenting is more limited than research on changes in marriage, more generally, and focuses on White families during early phases of family life. Some of this work shows that coparenting satisfaction during first six months of parenthood was relatively stable (e.g., Van Egeren, 2004), whereas other findings suggest that challenges surrounding child development are related to declines in coparenting support from infancy to early childhood (e.g., Davis, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, & Brown, 2009). Although it is agreed upon that transitions families experience later in development, such as when youth become adolescents or leave home in young adulthood, are periods of major flux, these periods have received little attention in the coparenting literature.

Adolescence, in particular, is a developmental transition that brings about a new set of parenting goals and demands, which may compel mothers and fathers to renegotiate their coparenting relationship. To the extent that adolescence imposes new challenges for parents, mothers and fathers may adapt to their changing parenting roles in different ways and thus experience less satisfaction with coparenting during offspring’s adolescence. In contrast to the idea that developmental transitions challenge coparenting, some scholars have argued that coparenting improves over time as parents’ gain experience and establish their coordinated parenting strategies (e.g., Van Egeren, 2004). From this perspective, it is possible that parents become increasingly satisfied with coparenting over the course of their marriage. We tested these competing ideas by examining changes in mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting satisfaction through the second decade of marriage and by exploring the moderating role of youth age on cross-time change. Further, because husbands often report higher satisfaction with coparenting compared to their wives during early childhood (e.g. Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001; Van Egeren, 2004), we also tested whether levels and/or patterns of change in coparenting satisfaction differed for mothers versus fathers.
Associations between Marital Qualities and Coparenting

Although there is some controversy in the literature concerning the distinction between coparenting and marital relationships, more generally, theoretical and empirical evidence demonstrate that spouses’ ability to work together in their parenting roles (i.e., coparenting) is distinct from other dimensions of marriage (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). In part this is because coparenting encompasses characteristics and behaviors of both parents and offspring, and as a result, captures family dynamics that are distinct from either the marital dyad or spouses as individuals. Indeed, empirical findings show that features of couple relationships that pertain to childrearing are more strongly related to parenting and child adjustment than is general marital quality (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998), and that coparenting relationships can be positive even in the face of marital distress (Lewis & Looney, 1983; McHale, 1995; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000).

An emotional spillover perspective directs attention to the transfer of mood and affect from one sphere of family functioning to other interpersonal relationship experiences (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). In support of this perspective, research examining the links between marital qualities and coparenting shows that high marital love and low marital conflict are associated with greater support and satisfaction in coparenting during infancy and early child development (e.g., Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995; Katz & Gottman, 1996). From a developmental standpoint, both marital and coparenting processes are not static, but change over time in conjunction with family circumstances. The manner in which changes in marital qualities are related to corresponding changes in coparenting satisfaction, especially through later phases of family life, is an important question about family systems that has yet to be addressed by empirical research.

Accordingly, taking the perspective that marital and coparenting relationships are mutually interrelated yet discrete family systems dynamics, in this paper we examined whether changes in marital qualities, that is, marital love and marital conflict, were linked to changes in coparenting satisfaction across time. Grounded in ideas regarding emotional spillover and crossover, we expected that increases in marital love would be positively related to increases in coparenting satisfaction, and that increases in
marital conflict would be related to declines in coparenting satisfaction. We also expected that marital love and conflict would have stronger implications for fathers’ coparenting given that problems in the couple relationship may be more disruptive for men’s parenting than for women’s (Coiro & Emery, 1998; Kitzmann, 2000; Kolak & Volling, 2007).

**Inter-Parental Incongruence in Attitudes towards Childrearing**

Parents’ gendered attitudes related to childrearing may also have implications for marital and coparenting processes, as they reflect mothers’ and fathers’ expectations about the extent to which parenting roles and activities should be shared. Gendered attitudes regarding family roles are especially relevant in African American families: Compared to other ethnic groups, African American men have been shown to be more traditional in their attitudes about family roles, but African American women, more egalitarian (e.g., Kane, 2000). Though we know little about the role of gendered attitudes related to childrearing for coparenting in African American families, research on European American couples reveals that egalitarian attitudes are generally related to more positive marital qualities (Amato & Booth, 1995; Lavee & Katz, 2002). Given the salience of gender dynamics for African American men and women, in concert with the relevance of childrearing attitudes for coparenting, it is likely that gendered attitudes towards childrearing have implications for coparenting satisfaction in African American families.

The idea that similarity between family members’ attitudes is linked to more positive family relationships has been supported in clinical and empirical work (e.g., Deal, Wampler, & Halverson, 1992). In this light, we were interested in the coparenting implications of congruence between mothers’ and fathers’ attitudes toward childrearing roles. Early work on spousal attitudes has demonstrated that couples with more incongruent attitudes about family roles had poorer marital qualities relative to couples in which partners shared similar gender role attitudes (Bowen & Orthner, 1983). Extending this work to coparenting and attitudes about childrearing roles, we took a cumulative risk perspective and predicted that inter-parental incongruence would put couples with lower marital love or more marital conflict at higher risk for dissatisfaction with coparenting; we also expected that congruent childrearing attitudes
would be protective, such that couples with more similar attitudes would report higher coparenting satisfaction, even in the face of lower marital love or higher marital conflict.

**The Present Study**

In sum, this study addressed three research goals. The first was to chart the trajectory of coparenting satisfaction across the first two decades of marriage. Here we also investigated whether the trajectory of coparenting differed for mothers versus fathers. In line with past research showing that fathers perceive more support and satisfaction in coparenting than mothers (e.g., Margolin et al., 2001; Van Egeren, 2004), we expected that fathers would be more satisfied with coparenting than mothers. In addition, couples’ offspring ranged in age from early to mid-adolescence, allowing us to gain insights into changes in coparenting satisfaction across years of marriage that also varied as a function of youth age. Accordingly, we tested the moderating role of offspring age on the trajectory of change in coparenting satisfaction, with the expectation that coparenting satisfaction would be more perturbed for parents rearing adolescent as opposed to pre-adolescent-age offspring.

Our second goal was to examine the longitudinal links between both marital love and conflict and coparenting satisfaction. From an emotional spillover perspective, we posited that increases in marital love would be positively related to changes in coparenting satisfaction, but that increases in marital conflict would be linked to declines in coparenting satisfaction. Again, we examined differences between parents in these links; given past research that fathers’ parenting may be more susceptible to marital problems than mothers (Kolak & Volling, 2007), we tested the hypothesis that fathers would be more satisfied with coparenting compared to mothers.

Our third goal was to test the role of inter-parental incongruence in childrearing attitudes for coparenting satisfaction and whether attitude congruence moderated the links between martial qualities and coparenting satisfaction. We expected that attitude incongruence would be linked to less satisfaction, and taking a cumulative risk perspective, we hypothesized that attitude incongruence would also exacerbate the negative effects of low marital love and high conflict on coparenting satisfaction. Based on research that inter-parental similarity promotes better relationship qualities, we also expected that attitude
congruence would protect couples with low marital love and/or high marital conflict from declines in coparenting satisfaction.

Method

Participants

The data came from mothers and fathers in 155 families that participated in a three-year longitudinal study of family relationships in two-parent African American families. Given the broad goals of the study, we targeted families that self-identified as Black or African American and that included a mother figure and father figure who were living together with at least two early- to late-adolescent offspring. Recruitment took place in two urban centers in the northeast with substantial African American populations, and we used two strategies to generate the sample (see author, citation) for more details on recruitment procedures). First, we hired African Americans residing in targeted communities to recruit families by advertising in businesses, churches, and at community events. Approximately half of the sample was recruited in this way. To recruit the rest of the sample, we purchased a marketing list of names and addresses of families with offspring in grades 4-7. We sent letters describing the study, and interested and eligible families called a toll-free number or returned a postcard.

Of the original 202 families participating in the first phase of the larger study, 8 parents who were not currently in a couple relationship, (e.g., mother and grandfather pairs) and 12 families in which parents separated before the first wave of data collection was completed were omitted. Also omitted from the growth curve analyses were 15 couples who were living together but not married, and 7 couples who were married for more than 24 years and 5 couples who had been married for fewer than 4 years due to insufficient sample size at the tail ends of the distribution. Of the 155 families in the present analyses, at Time 1, mean ages of mothers and fathers were 40.78 ($SD = 5.00$), and 43.43 ($SD = 6.21$), respectively, and families were generally working and middle class. Most parents were employed (90% of mothers and 96% of fathers). On average, mothers’ education was 14.85 years ($SD = 1.71$) and fathers’ education, 14.52 years ($SD = 2.30$), which corresponds to vocational school/some college. Fathers worked an average of 44.92 hours per week ($SD = 16.91$), and mothers worked approximately 33.51 hours per week.
Mothers’ job prestige averaged 48.37 (SD = 11.76), and fathers’ averaged 47.34 (SD = 13.72, which corresponds to jobs such as real estate agent and sheriff-law enforcement officer (Nakao & Treas, 1994). The mean household income was $94,472 (SD = $56.058). Target offspring were 10.36 (SD =1.07) years old, on average, at Time 1, but ranged in age from 8 to 15, with approximately equal numbers of daughters (52%) and sons, and most offspring were biologically related to mothers (98%) and fathers (90%).

Sample attrition was minimal. In addition to the 47 couples that were omitted, 7 families withdrew over the three year study period, but they did not differ from other families on demographic characteristics at Time 1. With respect to couple relationships, of the 155 sets of parents included in the present analyses, 142 couples were married for the duration of the study period, for an average of 15.02 years (SD = 5.09). Thirteen couples divorced between waves 2 and 3 of data collection. At Time 1, fathers who divorced had significantly less education, \( t = 4.26, p < .01 \), income, \( t = 2.71, p < .01 \), and lower coparenting satisfaction, \( t = 2.11, p < .05 \), compared to non-divorced fathers, and divorced mothers were less satisfied with coparenting than their married counterparts, \( t = 4.22, p < .01 \). These couples were retained in analyses on the basis of research that coparenting processes are distinct from marital relationship experiences. However, marital status at Time 3 was included as a control in all models.

**Procedures**

Mothers and fathers were interviewed annually in their homes by a team of two interviewers, almost all of whom were African American. Parents reported on relationship experiences, individual characteristics and attitudes, personal experiences, and individual well-being during the past year. Interviews generally lasted two to three hours. Following the completion of interviews, families received a $200 honorarium.

**Measures**

Coparenting satisfaction was measured at all three time points using items from the Domains of Marriage scale (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986). On a scale ranging from 1 = extremely dissatisfied to 9 = extremely satisfied, mothers and fathers responded to three questions: (1) “How satisfied are you with
your partner’s fundamental principles about how to bring up children (e.g., values, discipline, etc.)” (2) “How satisfied are you with the extent to which your partner supports your decisions about rules and discipline, makes you feel good about the kind of parent you are, etc.?”. (3) “How satisfied are you with the way parenting decisions in your family get made and the level of influence you have in those decisions?” Alphas ranged from .84 to .89 across study years and parents.

**Marital relationship qualities** also were measured at each time. Marital love was assessed using 9 items from the Relationships Questionnaire (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Using a scale where 1 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much* mothers and fathers reported on marital relationship love during the past year, e.g., “To what extent do you have a sense of ‘belonging’ with your partner?”. Alphas ranged from .89 to .95 across study years and parents. Marital conflict was assessed using 5 items. On the same 9-point scale, mothers and fathers rated their marital conflict during the past year, e.g., “How often do you and your partner argue with one another?”. Alphas ranged from .74 to .82.

**Attitudes towards childrearing** were assessed at Time 1 using the 7 items from Hoffman and Kloska’s (1995) Gender-Based Attitudes towards Childrearing subscale. Mothers and fathers used a 4-point scale where 1 = *strongly agree* to 4 = *strongly disagree* to rate how well the item described them over the past year, e.g., “It is more important to raise a son to be strong and independent than to raise a daughter that way.” Higher scores reflected more traditional attitudes towards childrearing. Alphas were .80 for mothers and .83 for fathers. Given that we had no predictions about the extent to which different types of incongruence would be important for coparenting satisfaction (i.e., mothers more traditional than fathers; fathers more traditional than mothers), we used the absolute value of the difference between mothers’ and fathers’ attitudes towards childrearing in the analyses.

**Background and demographic information** including highest education completed, household size, and mothers’ and fathers’ income was collected at each time point.

**Results**

**Analytic Strategy**
To examine the trajectory of coparenting satisfaction as a function of couple relationship duration, we used a multi-level modeling (MLM) strategy. This approach extends multiple regression to account for dependencies in the data, i.e., within person over time, between parents in the same family. Another advantage of MLM is that it provides for the use of unbalanced data, meaning that it is not necessary for every individual to be assessed at the same point in time. This feature of MLM allowed us to use relationship duration as the index of time, despite differences in these durations at each time of measurement. In doing so we were able to detect patterns of change that might have been obscured if we had relied on year of study as the time metric. In addition, an MLM framework provides for the use of cases with one or more observations missing at random (Raudenbush, & Byrk, 2002), allowing us to include all 155 families in these analyses.

We began by testing a three level model for coparenting satisfaction using SAS Proc Mixed, version 9.2. The Level 1, or within-person model, captures changes in coparenting satisfaction in relation to time-varying covariates. To describe patterns of change in coparenting satisfaction as a function of marital duration, we included a marital time polynomial at Level 1. To understand the moderating role of adolescent development for marital-duration related changes in coparenting satisfaction, we included the adolescent age X marital time interaction term, also at Level 1. To examine whether changes in marital love and marital conflict were related to changes in coparenting satisfaction, we also included time-varying covariates at Level 1. These were group-mean centered, or centered around each individual’s cross-time mean.

At Level 2 we included predictors at the between parent, or within-family, level. The Level 2 model accounts for dependencies between members of the same family. By including both mothers and fathers in the same analysis we were able to test the moderating role of parent gender, that is, whether the trajectory of coparenting satisfaction change was different for mothers versus fathers; thus we included the cross-level interaction between the quadratic time polynomial and parent gender to determine whether mothers and fathers differed in their patterns of changes. The variables included at Level 2 were time-invariant characteristics that differed for mothers and fathers (i.e., mothers’ and fathers’ individual
attitudes towards childrearing). In addition, to document how changes in parents’ marital experiences were linked to changes in coparenting satisfaction, we included the cross-time means for each individual on the time-varying predictors (included at Level 1). That is, because the Level 2 cross-time means reflect all between-individual variation, controlling for this variable limits the time-varying version of the variable to explaining within-individual variation over time, beyond stable individual differences (Jacobs et al., 2002; Raudenbush & Byrk, 2002).

Level 3 estimates are between-family characteristics, that is, characteristics that are shared by mothers and fathers and do not change over time. Here we included the dyadic score for incongruent attitudes towards childrearing.

In the case of significant interactions by parent gender, to test the slopes we reran the same models treating mothers as the reference group (i.e., dummy coding instead of effect coding). We followed up significant interactions involving two continuous variables using procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991). Specifically, we distinguished high (1 SD above the mean) versus low (1 SD below the mean) levels of the moderator variable and ran separate models for parents who were more incongruent versus more similar in their attitudes towards childrearing. In reporting the results we focus on significant effects at $p < .05$, however, we consider trend-level effects, $p < .10$, when they were consistent with hypotheses and results from prior research. We begin by describing the results of preliminary analyses. The remainder of the results are organized around our three research goals: (1) to describe changes in coparenting satisfaction across marriage and the moderating roles of parent gender and offspring age; (2) to assess links between changes in marital love and conflict and changes in coparenting satisfaction; and (3) to examine the implications of childrearing attitude incongruence, including its role as a moderator of the effects of marital love and conflict, for changes in coparenting satisfaction.

**Preliminary Analyses**

Correlations, means, and standard deviations for study variables are presented in Table 2.1. Parents who were married longer and had older offspring reported less marital love, and parents who were
more incongruent in their childrearing attitudes were less satisfied with coparenting and reported more marital conflict. For fathers, biological relatedness was positively related to coparenting satisfaction, but fathers of older offspring were less satisfied with coparenting. Fathers’ biological relatedness was also positively related to marital duration. Mothers’ marital duration was negatively related to coparenting satisfaction, indicating that mothers who were married longer were less satisfied with coparenting.

**Longitudinal Changes in Coparenting Satisfaction**

A preliminary series of MLMs were conducted to examine the overall growth trajectory of coparenting satisfaction across marital duration. The index of time (i.e., marital duration) was centered at 13 years, the mean marital duration across couples, across all time points. Based on AIC and BIC fit statistics and the significance of variance components, a model with a random intercept and fixed quadratic term was chosen as the initial model for coparenting satisfaction. On average, quadratic change in coparenting satisfaction was significant, $\gamma = -.007, SE = .002, p < .01$. As Figure 2.1 shows, coparenting satisfaction increased through the first decade of couples’ marriages, followed by a period of stability from about year 12 to 18, and then declined. Neither the parent gender effect nor the gender x quadratic change effect was significant indicating that this pattern of change did not differ for mothers versus fathers.

We next tested whether offspring age moderated the pattern of change in coparenting satisfaction. This model revealed a significant quadratic marital duration X offspring age interaction (shown in Table 2.2, Model A). To follow-up analyses, we divided couples into two groups: those with offspring younger than 11.5 years (the average age of offspring in the sample) and those with offspring 11.5 years and older and ran the analyses separately for each group. These results showed that the significant quadratic pattern for coparenting satisfaction emerged only for couples with older offspring, $\gamma = -.01, SE = .003, p < .01$; in contrast, for couples with younger offspring there was no significant change in coparenting satisfaction, $\gamma = .001, SE = .003, ns$ (Figure 2.2). Of note, there were at least 10 cases at each year of marriage for each age group shown in Figure 2.2. To understand whether biological relatedness was a factor in the
interaction between offspring age and marital duration, we also tested the role of mothers’ and fathers’
biological relatedness to offspring, however these effects were non-significant.

**Links between Marital Qualities and Coparenting Satisfaction**

Our next step was to test whether changes in marital love and marital conflict were linked with
changes in coparenting satisfaction. Findings are shown in Table 2.2, Model B (love) and Model C
(conflict). Beginning with marital love, in line with our second hypothesis, increases in love at Level 1
were positively related to changes in coparenting satisfaction, meaning that, beyond average levels of
marital love, at times when parents experienced more love in their marriage, they had higher satisfaction
with coparenting. Average marital love was also positively related to coparenting satisfaction, but a
significant interaction indicated that this effect differed by parent gender. Follow-up analyses revealed
that fathers who reported more marital love were more satisfied with coparenting, $\gamma = .84$, $SE = .08$, $p < .01$. The positive link between marital love and coparenting satisfaction was also significant, but slightly
weaker, for mothers, $\gamma = .63$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$ (Figure 2.3).

Turning to marital conflict, also consistent with our hypothesis, time-varying change in marital
conflict at Level 1 was negatively associated with coparenting satisfaction: At times when parents
experienced greater marital conflict than usual, they were less satisfied with coparenting. In addition, the
average level of marital conflict at Level 2 was inversely related to coparenting, and this link was
moderated by parent gender. Similar to the findings for marital love, follow-up tests showed that the
negative link between marital conflict and coparenting satisfaction was significant for both parents, but
was slightly stronger for fathers, $\gamma = -.61$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$, than mothers, $\gamma = -.43$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$
(Figure 2.4).

**The Moderating Role of Inter-Parental Incongruence in Childrearing Attitudes**

The final step in the analyses was to test the main effect and moderating role of inter-parental
incongruence in childrearing attitudes for links between marital qualities and coparenting satisfaction.
There was no main effect of parents’ own childrearing attitudes or incongruent attitudes for coparenting
satisfaction. Controlling for parents’ individual attitudes toward childrearing, inter-parental incongruence moderated the links between marital love and coparenting satisfaction, but did not moderate marital conflict – coparenting associations. Consistent with our hypothesis, the link between marital love and coparenting satisfaction was positive, significant, and stronger for parents who were more incongruent in their childrearing attitudes, $\gamma = .89$, $SE = .11$, $p < .01$, compared to parents whose attitudes were more similar, $\gamma = .49$, $SE = .04$, $p < .01$ (Figure 2.5). At low levels of marital love, parents who were more incongruent were less satisfied with coparenting, but at high levels of love, attitude incongruence did not make a difference in coparenting satisfaction.

**Post-Hoc Analyses**

To further understand the interaction between marital duration and offspring age for change in coparenting satisfaction, we conducted two sets of descriptive post-hoc analyses. Although neither mothers’ nor fathers’ biological relatedness to offspring was a moderator of change in coparenting satisfaction, it is possible that the relatively small number of cases of non-biological parents ($n = 38$ fathers, $n = 5$ mothers) prevented us from detecting differences using three-way interactions. Thus, to test for potential confounds between biological relatedness, age of offspring, and marital duration, in the first set of post-hoc analyses the sample was split into two groups based on the duration of couples’ marriage (short = 4-15 years; long = 16-24 years). Next, we conducted a series of independent samples $t$-tests to understand whether there were mean level differences in youth age or biological relatedness to mothers and fathers depending on the length of parents’ marriage. Youth in the short married group were significantly younger, on average, $t = -6.68$, $p < .01$, compared to youth whose parents had been married for longer. Fathers in the short married group were significant more likely to be non-biologically related to offspring, compared to fathers in longer marriages, $t = 6.61$, $p < .01$; there was no difference for mothers’ biological relatedness.

In the second set of post-hoc analyses, the sample was divided on the basis of offspring age (young adolescents = younger than 11.5 years; older adolescents = older than or equal to 11.5 years). We
first examined correlations between marital duration and offspring age within each group, and next, conducted independent samples t-tests to understand mean level differences in marital duration and biological relatedness for younger versus older offspring. Correlations revealed that youth age and marital duration were positively related for older adolescents, \( r = .18, p < .01 \), but not for younger adolescents, \( r = .09, ns \). For both groups, marital duration ranged from 4-24 years, which was the length of marriage for the whole sample, but marital duration was significantly shorter for parents of younger adolescents, \( t = -5.26, p < .01 \). There was no significant difference in parents’ biological relatedness on the basis of whether offspring were in the younger versus older adolescent group (for fathers, \( t = .52, ns \); for mothers, \( t = .57, ns \)).

**Discussion**

The goals of this research were to chart the trajectory of coparenting satisfaction through the first and second decades of marriage in two-parent African American families, and to examine the role of offspring age and marital qualities for changes in coparenting satisfaction over time. Findings revealed that coparenting satisfaction increased across the first decade of marriage and declined during the second decade—but only for couples with adolescent-age offspring. For parents with younger offspring, in contrast, coparenting satisfaction did not evidence significant change. Extending research on African American marital relationships, which has largely concentrated on patterns of marital stability and dissolution, our findings also shed light on the links between changes in marital qualities and corresponding changes in coparenting satisfaction. By accounting for average levels of marital qualities, we were able to determine that the links between marital love and conflict and coparenting satisfaction were not due to stable individual or contextual factors such as personality qualities or living circumstances. Finally, going beyond parents’ individual reports of their attitudes towards childrearing, we demonstrated that inter-parental incongruence served as a risk factor: Consistent with a cumulative risk model, when attitude incongruence was higher, couples with low levels of marital love were especially dissatisfied with coparenting. Taken together, the findings from this study are consistent with
the tenets of family systems theory, that developmental changes of individual family members have implications for broader family dynamics, and that subsystems within the family are interrelated.

**Longitudinal Change in Coparenting Satisfaction**

Coparenting satisfaction increased through the first decade of marriage peaking around 10-12 years, leveled off, and then declined in the second half of the second decade of marriage. This effect, however, was qualified by offspring age. In families of middle-to-late adolescents, the inverted-U pattern of change was significant; in contrast, there was no significant change in coparenting satisfaction in families of young adolescents. Couples in relatively shorter marriages (i.e. married fewer than 15 years) but who were coparenting adolescents an older adolescent became increasingly satisfied through the first decade of their marriage. Post-hoc analyses revealed that these couples were more likely than longer married couples to include a non-biological father. This pattern may mean that learning to work together for the first time during a challenging period in offspring’s development promoted more positive coparenting, and in turn, coparenting satisfaction, among these new coparents. In addition, longer married couples had significantly older offspring, compared to parents with short marital durations. For parents with a longer marital duration who presumably had established coparenting dynamics in the early stages of offspring’s development, declines in coparenting satisfaction seemed to coincide with offspring’s adolescence, suggesting that challenges associated with this developmental period negatively interfered with coparenting dynamics that had already been in place.

In contrast to parents of adolescents, coparents of younger adolescents were more satisfied overall and experienced no significant change in coparenting satisfaction across the years of marriage. Post-hoc analyses showed that, although parents of younger adolescents were married for significantly less time compared to parents of older adolescents, the range of marital duration was the same for older and younger offspring. In addition, among younger adolescents, offspring age and marital duration were not correlated. Findings also showed that parents’ biological relatedness was not significantly related to age of younger adolescents. Together, these findings suggest, that regardless of how long parents had been
married and whether or not they were biological parents of offspring, pre-adolescents presented fewer challenges to coparents.

Taken together, such findings lend support to the idea that the challenges adolescence imposes on mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting depends, in part, on parents’ biological relatedness to offspring and on how long parents have been coparenting. More generally, these findings illustrate the family systems idea that the implications of offspring’s developmental transitions reverberated in other family subsystems. Future research should consider the developmental status of youth for other family systems processes. It should also be noted that, inconsistent with past research that has found fathers to be more satisfied with their coparenting relationship than their partners, mothers and fathers did not differ on average or in the pattern of change in coparenting satisfaction. Further research is needed to understand whether gender differences in coparenting become less evident in families of adolescents, or whether African American mothers and fathers are more similar in their evaluations of coparenting compared to European American coparents.

**Marital Qualities, Incongruent Childrearing Attitudes, and Coparenting Satisfaction**

Consistent with our expectation regarding emotional spillover, changes in marital qualities were associated with corresponding changes in coparenting satisfaction and there were significant mother-father differences in these links. Marital love was positively related and marital conflict, negatively related to coparenting satisfaction for mothers and fathers, but these links were stronger for fathers’ evaluations of coparenting satisfaction. These findings corroborate past research with White families, showing that, compared to mothers’, fathers’ parenting is more susceptible to problems in the marriage (Kolak & Volling, 2007), in addition to positive spillover from marital well-being (Coiro & Emery, 1998; Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, 1993). Mothers’ family roles also have been described as more scripted than fathers (Brody, Arias, & Fincham, 1996; Jouriles & Farris, 1992), which may mean that mothers are less susceptible to negative emotional spillover from other family relationships.

Our hypothesis regarding the role of incongruent childrearing attitudes as an additional risk factor for coparenting satisfaction was partially supported. Couples who reported lower levels of marital love
and who had incongruent attitudes towards childrearing reported the lowest satisfaction with coparenting. Interestingly, incongruent attitudes were only problematic for coparenting satisfaction in the context of a low-love marital relationship, suggesting that marital love may be more important to coparenting than shared childrearing ideologies. In contrast to our expectations, incongruent attitudes were not a factor in coparenting satisfaction when considering marital conflict: Marital conflict was negatively related to coparenting satisfaction regardless of whether couples had similar or incongruent attitudes. Taken together, these results are in line with evidence that high marital love is a key factor in marital satisfaction, even in the face of marital conflict (Bradbury et al., 2000). In the same way, having similar attitudes is not sufficient to promote coparenting satisfaction in the absence of high marital love.

**Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

Extending what is known about coparenting, the findings from this study lend support to the idea that coparenting satisfaction is not a static family process, but continues to develop over the course of marriage. Further, changes in coparenting satisfaction seem to be dependent on offspring’s developmental status. Indeed, a key strength of this study was our ability to disentangle the contribution of marital duration from the contribution of child development to changes in coparenting satisfaction over time. More specifically, our results showed that biological relatedness of fathers to offspring could have played a role in the increasing satisfaction of newly married parents at the onset of coparenting an adolescent. In contrast, coparenting pre-adolescents seemed to be relatively easier, in that parents’ were more satisfied with coparenting offspring who were younger than 11.5 regardless of their biological relation to youth or the length of their marriage. The finding that adolescent development negatively interfered with coparenting for parents’ who were likely to be biologically related to offspring and who had been married for longer than 10 years suggests that the adolescent transition disrupted coparenting patterns that had been established earlier in child development. In contrast, in couples that were more likely to include non-biological fathers, coparents seemed to benefit from learning to coparent an adolescent together, and as a result, they were increasingly satisfied through the first decade of marriage. These findings may be relevant for interventions targeting coparents of adolescent offspring. Taken together, findings from this
study take an important first step in documenting the development of coparenting through later phases of family life.

Although this research has several strengths, it is not without limitations. Though we used a dyadic measure of incongruent childrearing attitudes, like most studies on coparenting evaluations (e.g., Margolin et al., 2001) we relied on parents’ reports of their coparenting satisfaction and marital qualities and as such which may be subject to self-reporter biases. Further, even though there was a range in income and education, this sample was relatively socio-economically advantaged and came from a circumscribed geographic location, meaning that these findings are not generalizable to the larger population. In addition, coparenting was not measured with reference to a focal child. Just as parenting processes are not the same for all children in the family, it will be important to understand differences in mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting evaluations vis-à-vis each child in the family. Finally, our findings supported a family systems perspective that family subsystems are interrelated and family processes do not occur in isolation. Thus, it is important to recognize that other family dynamics, including parent-child relationships, may help to explain changes in coparenting satisfaction. Examining other time-varying family relationship processes as correlates of coparenting is an important step for future research.

Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to empirical literature on families as systems. These findings advance our understanding of coparenting, a fundamental family systems dynamic, and demonstrate that developmental transitions within families do not occur in a vacuum, but influence the qualities of other family dynamics. Our findings also demonstrate that coparenting and marital qualities covary together over the course of adolescent development when parenting and marital relationships may be challenged in different ways. The findings of this study also speak more generally to the growing body of work on normative family relationship processes within African American families. Together, the results highlight the significance of examining coparenting satisfaction across years of couples’ marriage while also taking other family dynamics into consideration.
References


Margolin, G. Gordis, E. B. John, R. S. (2001). Coparenting: A link between marital conflict and parenting...


Table 2.1. *Means (and SD’s) and correlations between study variables.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
<th>7.</th>
<th>Means for mothers (and SD’s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Coparenting satisfaction</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>-.36</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>7.18 (1.70)</td>
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<td>2. Marital duration</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>15.03 (5.09)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Offspring age</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>11.41 (1.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Marital love</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>7.72 (1.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Marital conflict</td>
<td>-.56</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>4.14 (1.53)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Incongruent child-rearing attitudes</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>3.56 (2.68)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Biological relatedness</td>
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<td>-.39</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.02 (.14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Means for fathers (and SD’s) | 7.37| 15.03| 11.41| 7.85| 3.78| 3.56| .11 |
| (1.59)| (5.09)| (1.39)| (1.20)| (1.53)| (2.68)| (.31) | |

*Note.* Correlations for mothers above the diagonal, correlations for fathers below the diagonal, correlations between parents on the diagonal. Correlations larger than $r = .07$ are significant at $p < .05$. 

Table 2.2. Coefficients for change in coparenting satisfaction as a function of marital satisfaction and child age, predicted by marital love and conflict, and moderated by incongruent attitudes towards childrearing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed effect</th>
<th>Unconditional Model</th>
<th>Model A: Longitudinal Change</th>
<th>Model B: Marital Love</th>
<th>Model C: Marital Conflict</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \gamma )</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>( \gamma )</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>7.50**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>7.34**</td>
<td>.15</td>
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<td>Level 1:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital duration (Linear)</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<td>Marital duration (Quadratic)</td>
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<td>.003</td>
<td>-.005</td>
<td>.003</td>
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<td>Youth age</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>-.007</td>
<td>.008</td>
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<td>Youth age X Quadratic</td>
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<td>.001</td>
<td>-.003†</td>
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<td>Love</td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-34**</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average love</td>
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<td>.08</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Average conflict</td>
<td>-61**</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Avg. Love X Parent gender</td>
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<td>Childrearing attitudes</td>
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<td>Incongruent attitudes X Love</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td>Level 3:</td>
<td>.89**</td>
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<td>.87**</td>
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Note. * Fathers are the reference group.
† \( p < .10 \) * \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \)
Figure 2.1. Quadratic change in coparenting satisfaction as a function of marital duration

Note. Intercept and slope for change in coparenting satisfaction is not significantly different for mothers and fathers.

† p < .10 * p < .05, ** p < .01

Figure 2.2. Interaction between quadratic effect of marital duration and offspring age for change in coparenting satisfaction.

† p < .10 * p < .05, ** p < .01
Figure 2.3. Interaction between marital love and parent gender for coparenting satisfaction.

\[ p < .10\] *\( p < .05\), **\( p < .01\)

Figure 2.4. Interaction between marital conflict and parent gender for coparenting satisfaction.

\[ p < .10\] *\( p < .05\), **\( p < .01\)
Figure 2.5. Interaction between marital love and incongruent attitudes towards childrearing for coparenting satisfaction.

\[ p < .10 \quad \hat{p} \quad p < .05 \quad ** p < .01 \]
Chapter 3.

Changes in African American Parents’ Coparenting Satisfaction during Offspring’s Adolescence: The Role of Sociocultural Stressors and Supports

Abstract

Based in family systems and ecological perspectives, this study expanded the scope of coparenting research by: (1) describing the trajectory of coparenting satisfaction for mothers and fathers in two-parent African American families during their offspring’s adolescence, and (2) examining the role of sociocultural stressors and supports for changes in coparenting satisfaction over time. Participants were 192 African American mothers and fathers who reported on their coparenting satisfaction and both stressors (economic strain, racial discrimination), and supports (socioeconomic resources, religiosity). Analyses revealed that changes in coparenting satisfaction differed for mothers and fathers: Mothers were less satisfied on average but showed no change over time whereas fathers experienced a linear decline, becoming less satisfied with coparenting over the course of youth’s adolescent development. Findings were generally consistent with hypotheses that stressors were negatively linked and religiosity was positively related to coparenting satisfaction. Findings for racial discrimination and income differed by parent and highlighted gender dynamics within couple relationships. We discuss implications for understanding of normative family processes in African American families as these unfold within both the family and broader sociocultural contexts.
Coparenting, defined as “the way that parents work together in their parenting roles” (Feinberg 2003, p. 1499), is a fundamental family systems dynamic that encompasses experiences and characteristics of mothers, fathers, and offspring. As a family systems construct, coparenting is sensitive to the developmental transitions of family members. For example, during the transition to parenthood when parents learn to work together in their parenting roles, there is evidence that changes in coparenting experiences coincide with changes in infants’ development (e.g., Davis, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, & Brown, 2009). Adolescence marks another period in development when parents may need to renegotiate their roles to get on the same page with respect to their childrearing. However, relatively little is known about the changes in family systems dynamics, like coparenting, that accompany this often challenging phase of development.

We also know very little about coparenting in two-parent African American families. Instead, studies of coparenting in African American families focus almost exclusively on single mothers and a non-marital coparent. Although more than half of African American youth are raised by single mothers, a sizeable portion grow up in two-parent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), and the body of research documenting racial-ethnic differences in marital and parenting dynamics (e.g., Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Steinberg, 1996), suggests that study of coparenting within two-parent African American families is warranted. Towards this end, the first goal of this study was to investigate the longitudinal trajectory of African American mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting satisfaction during their offspring’s adolescent development.

From an ecological perspective, family dynamics are rooted in a sociocultural context. (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Within this framework, researchers have identified that economic and cultural stressors have implications for family processes in African American families (e.g., Conger et al., 2002). At the same time, socioeconomic resources as well as cultural values and practices can play a protective role and support the development of positive family dynamics, even in the face of challenges faced by African American families in the U.S. (e.g., Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996). In an effort to expand the scope of coparenting research to include the sociocultural contexts of African American families, the
second goal of this study was to examine the implications of sociocultural stressors and supports for changes in coparenting satisfaction. Specifically, we investigated sociocultural factors that have proven important in prior research on African Americans, parents’ experiences of economic strain and racial discrimination as stressors, and as indices of support, the socioeconomic resources of mothers’ and fathers’ income and education and parents’ religiosity, for their coparenting satisfaction.

**Coparenting during Adolescence**

Adolescence is characterized by increasing independence and autonomy from parents while, at the same time, youth continue to rely on parents for many forms of support (Collins, Gleason, & Sesma, 1997). This developmental phase places new demands on the family system and, in European American families, can put relationships at risk for increased conflict and decreased warmth (e.g., Shanahan, Crouter, McHale, & Osgood, 2007). Although research focusing on coparenting in families of adolescents is limited, there is some evidence that coparenting older children is distinct from coparenting during early childhood (Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993; Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). Compared to coparents of preschoolers, for example, mothers and fathers of preadolescents were more likely to draw offspring into their conflicts and create family alliances, perhaps due to preadolescents’ social and cognitive maturity, including their ability to take sides (Margolin et al., 2001). Parents of preschoolers also reported more coparenting cooperation than parents of adolescents, possibly due to the fact that younger children require more frequent coordination relative to older, more autonomous youth (Maccoby et al., 1993). From research on coparenting in families of young children, evidence for the role of youth gender in coparenting is mixed. Family gender dynamics may intensify in adolescence, (Hill & Lynch, 1983), and accordingly, we might expect that youth gender will become a factor in coparenting satisfaction during adolescence. Parent gender may also play a role as mothers and fathers respond differently to developmental changes in their offspring, which could disrupt their established coparenting.

Extending current research on coparenting to families of older children, in this study we examined longitudinal changes in mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting satisfaction across their offspring’s adolescence. In line with evidence that adolescence brings changes to the family, we expected that many
parents must negotiate aspects of coparenting to accommodate changes in youth, a process that might be a
source of disruption in coparenting and lead to declines in coparenting satisfaction. In an effort to further
understand the links between adolescent development and coparenting satisfaction, we also included
youth’s pubertal development in addition to their age as a potential correlate of coparenting satisfaction.
Finally, we tested the implications of parents’ gender and youth’s gender by examining differences in the
coparenting satisfaction of mothers and fathers with sons versus daughters,

**Coparenting Satisfaction in African American Families**

The small body of research examining coparenting in African American families has focused on
support and inter-parental conflict between single mothers and non-marital coparents (generally
grandparents). Empirical studies show that coparenting relationships characterized by high support and
low conflict are positively related to well-being for mothers (Dorsey, Forehand, & Brody, 2007), youth
(Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, Foster, & Brody, 2005), and families (Jones, Shaffer, Forehand, Brody, &
Armistead, 2003; Brody & Flor, 1996). Very little is known, however, about coparenting experiences of
African American mother-father dyads who are in couple relationships, wherein coparenting may differ in
some ways from that involving inter-generational and/or non-romantic coparent figures. Further,
relatively less attention has been paid to the role of *coparenting satisfaction* for families, and for African
American families in particular. Prior research on coparenting has focused on dimensions of coparenting
practices (i.e., shared parenting, frequency of positive and conflictual interactions) and on coparenting
evaluations (i.e., perceived support). Like coparenting evaluations, coparenting satisfaction is a subjective
component of coparenting, one that captures parents’ degree of happiness with their partner’s parenting
practices.

Identifying the factors that are related to coparenting satisfaction among African American
mothers and fathers is an important area for further research for several reasons. First, drawing on what
we know about racial-ethnic differences in marriage and parenting, two family dynamics that are closely
tied to coparenting, African American men and women tend to be less satisfied in their couple
relationships (e.g., Broman, 1993), and they also tend to have more authoritarian parenting practices (e.g.,
Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Steinberg, 1996) compared to other groups. Looking across African American families, there is also evidence that mothers and fathers have different, and sometimes conflicting, parenting styles and goals, especially during adolescence (Smetana & Chuang, 2001); as such, parents are not always on the same page with respect to childrearing which may be reflected in coparenting dissatisfaction. More generally, mothers and fathers often have distinct family experiences: In White families, for example, fathers are generally more satisfied with coparenting than mothers (e.g., Floyd & Zmich, 1991; Russell & Russell, 1994), and in early childhood, mothers’ and fathers’ evaluations of coparenting follow different trajectories (see Van Egeren, 2004 for a review). Finally, an understanding of coparenting in a group that is underrepresented in empirical research may illuminate the manner in which sociocultural factors manifest themselves in normative family dynamics. For example, compared to men and women from other racial-ethnic groups, African American fathers are more likely to be involved in childrearing, and African American mothers have higher rates of involvement in the work force, and consequently, may be less involved at home (Hossain & Roopnarine, 1993; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000).

The Sociocultural Contexts of Coparenting: Stressors and Supports

Compared to other sociocultural groups, African American families are at increased risk to experience stressful experiences of economic hardship and racial discrimination (e.g. Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009). At the same time, socioeconomic resources and cultural supports may be protective for African American families (e.g., Brody et al., 1996). From family stress and emotional spillover perspectives, experiences of stressors trigger negative emotional responses, which may be transferred to close interpersonal relationships (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). Indeed, studies document that economic strain (Brody, et al., 1996; Cutrona et al., 2003; Gutman, McLoyd, & Tokoyawa, 2005) and racial discrimination (Feagin & McKinney, 2005; Murry et al., 2008) disrupt parenting, marital quality and family functioning among African American families. On the other hand, there is evidence that socioeconomic resources and religiosity serve as protective factors for African American families. The Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response Model (FAAR) theoretical
model was developed to understand the manner in which socioeconomic assets, including income and education, enable families to manage demands and to achieve positive adjustment in the face of stressors (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Patterson 2002). In support of theory, parenting and family functioning were more positive in African American households in which parents had higher incomes, education levels, and fewer dependent members (e.g., Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2009). Assets can also be defined as values and belief systems that benefit individuals and families (Rothwell & Han, 2010); among African Americans, religiosity has been referred to as a cultural value that promotes social bonds and family cohesion (Brody, et al., 1996). Although research on the role of religiosity for African American families is more limited than research on the family implications of other cultural values, Brody and colleagues (1994, 1996) identified positive links between parents’ religiosity and other features of family support and cohesion and negative associations between religious practices and inter-parental conflict.

Given the role of stressors and supports in other features of family functioning, and the significance of coparenting for individual and family well-being, researchers have recently started to explore socioeconomic factors as predictors of coparenting among African American single mothers (Sterrett, Jones, Forehand, & Garai, 2010) and non-resident fathers (Arditti & Kelly, 1994; Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2009). In research on coparenting evaluations of non-resident fathers, Arditti and Kelly (1994) found that education was positively related to coparenting evaluations, and among primarily African American non-resident men, higher income and education were related to more perceived coparenting support (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2009). Such findings were consistent with results from research on White married couples (Stright & Bales, 2003). This study takes the important step of examining whether these and other sociocultural stressors and supports contribute to coparenting satisfaction during adolescence, a time in offspring’s development that may pose challenges to coparents. Specifically, our second aim was to examine the implications of stressors and supports for changes in mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting satisfaction across offspring’s adolescence. Extending the key tenets of a family stress framework to coparenting, we expected that greater economic strain and racial discrimination would interfere with coparenting and be related to deterioration in coparenting satisfaction.
With respect to supports, we expected that more socioeconomic resources and higher levels of religiosity would predict coparenting satisfaction among African American mothers and fathers.

**The Present Study**

This study addressed two research goals. The first was to investigate changes in coparenting satisfaction among two-parent African American families during youth’s adolescent development. Based on prior research suggesting that the challenges associated with adolescence may interfere with aspects of family functioning, we expected coparenting satisfaction to decline from pre- to late adolescence. To further understand the implications of their adolescents’ development for coparenting satisfaction of mothers and fathers, we also tested the role of youth’s puberty development, with the expectation that pubertal development would be negatively related to coparenting satisfaction. Extending work on the role of gender in family dynamics, we investigated whether the trajectory of coparenting differed for mothers and fathers with sons and daughters. Given that little is known about the role of youth gender in coparenting satisfaction, our analyses here were exploratory. In line with past research showing that fathers perceived more support in coparenting than mothers (e.g., Margolin et al., 2001), however, we expected that fathers would be higher than mothers in their coparenting satisfaction.

Our second goal was to examine sociocultural factors that may have implications for changes in coparenting satisfaction. Working from a family stress perspective, that stressors interfere with positive family functioning, and the FAAR model, that family assets promote positive family adjustment, we expected: (1) that experiencing the stressors of economic strain and/or racial discrimination would be associated with declines in coparenting satisfaction, and (2) that higher supports in the form of socioeconomic resources (i.e., higher income and education), and stronger religiosity would protect coparenting satisfaction from declines in the face of normative stressors that occur during adolescence.

**Method**

**Participants**

The data came from mothers and fathers in 192 families that participated in a three-year longitudinal study of relationships in two-parent African American families. Given the larger goals of the
study, we targeted families that self-identified as Black or African American and included a mother figure and father figure who were living together with at least two pre- to late-adolescent offspring. Recruitment took place in two urban centers in the northeast with substantial African American populations, and we used two strategies to generate the sample. First, we hired African Americans residing in targeted communities to recruit families by advertising in businesses and churches, and at community events. Approximately half of the sample was recruited in this way. To recruit the rest of the sample, we purchased a marketing list of names and addresses of families with offspring in grades 4-7. We sent letters describing the study, and interested and eligible families called a toll-free number or returned a postcard.

Of the original 202 families participating in the first phase of the larger study, we omitted 8 families in which parents who were not in a couple relationship, (e.g., mother and grandfather) and 2 families in which parents separated before the first wave of data collection was completed. Of the 192 families in the present analyses, at Time 1, mean ages of mothers and fathers were 40.65 (SD = 5.63) and 43.36 (SD = 7.21), respectively. On average, mothers’ education was 14.63 (SD = 1.79) and fathers’ education, 14.24 (SD = 2.37), where a score of 12 refers to a high school degree and a score of 16 corresponds to a college degree. Families were generally working and middle class, and most parents were employed (97% of mothers and 93% of fathers). Fathers worked an average of 43.83 hours per week (SD = 17.88), and mothers worked approximately 32.64 hours per week (SD = 18.27). The mean household income was $89,077 (SD = 56,429). The majority (80%) of families included two or three children (M = 2.80, SD = 1.14. Target youth were 10.38 (SD =1.09) years old, on average, at Time 1, and the sample was approximately equally divided by youth’s gender (n = 104 girls, n = 88 boys). Most youth were biologically related to mothers (97%) and fathers (80%). To ensure that relatedness was not a factor in parents’ coparenting satisfaction, a dummy variable for biological (0) versus non-biological (1) relationship to each parent was tested as a control. Neither mothers’ biological relatedness, ρ = .01, SE =
.56, $t = .02, ns$, nor fathers’ relatedness, $r = -.28, SE = .23, t = -1.20, ns$, was related to coparenting so these controls were not included in the analyses.

Sample attrition was minimal. Nine families withdrew over the three-year study period, but they did not differ from other families on demographic characteristics at Time 1. With respect to couple relationships, of the 192 sets of parents included in the present analyses, 144 couples were married, 15 couples were not married but had been living together for at least 4 years, and 22 couples divorced or separated over the course of the study but they continued to participate and were included in the analyses. Among married parents, average marital duration across the study period was 15.51 years ($SD = 6.74$), and cohabiting couples averaged 8.46 years ($SD = 5.56$) together. In families that divorced during the study period fathers differed on Time 1 background characteristics and mothers’ and fathers’ had lower coparenting satisfaction compared to non-divorced couples. Divorced fathers had significantly lower education, $t = 4.26, p < .01$, income, $t = 2.71, p < .01$, and coparenting satisfaction, $t = 2.11, p < .05$, compared to non-divorced fathers, and divorced mothers were less satisfied with coparenting than their married counterparts, $t = 4.22, p < .01$. Accordingly, marital status was included as a control, but because it did not alter the results it was not included in the final analyses.

**Procedures**

Mothers and fathers were interviewed annually in their homes by a team of two interviewers, almost all of whom were African American. Family members reported on relationship experiences, individual characteristics and attitudes, personal experiences, and individual well-being during the past year, unless otherwise noted. Interviews lasted two to three hours. Following the completion of interviews, families received a $200 honorarium.

**Measures**

**Coparenting satisfaction** was measured at all three time points using items from the Domains of Marriage scale (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986). On a scale ranging from 1 = *extremely dissatisfied* to 9 = *extremely satisfied*, mothers and fathers responded to three questions: (1) “How satisfied are you with your partner’s fundamental principles about how to bring up children (e.g., values, discipline, etc.)” (2)
“How satisfied are you with the extent to which your partner supports your decisions about rules and discipline, makes you feel good about the kind of parent you are, etc.?" (3) “How satisfied are you with the way parenting decisions in your family get made and the level of influence you have in those decisions?” Alphas for mothers and fathers ranged from .84 to .89 across study years.

**Economic strain** was assessed by two items at each time point. On a scale ranging from 1 = *no difficulty* to 5 = *a great deal of difficulty*, keeping the last year in mind, mothers and fathers rated their difficulty in paying family bills each month. For the second item, using a scale where 1 = *more than enough* and 5 = *not enough to make ends meet*, mothers and fathers reported on how much money they had left over each month, after paying bills. Inter-item correlations ranged from \( r = .64 \) to \( r = .67 \) for mothers, and \( r = .66 \) to \( r = .70 \) for fathers.

**Racial discrimination experiences** were assessed at each point by the 11-item Experiences with Discrimination Scale (Murry et al., 2001). Mothers and fathers used a 4-point rating scale (1 = *never* to 4 = *several times*) to indicate how often they had experienced different types of discrimination during the past year, e.g., “How often has someone said something derogatory or insulting to you just because you are African American?” Alphas ranged from .87 to .92.

**Socioeconomic resources** were measured by parents’ education and income. Mothers and fathers each reported on their highest level of education (where 12 = High school degree to 20, 14 = Vocational school, 16 = College degree, 18 = Master’s Degree , 20 = Ph.D./Doctorate). Parents also reported on their own annual income.

**Religiosity** was measured at Time 1 using 16 items, e.g., “I find strength and comfort in my religion”, from the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality (Underwood, 1999). Using a 4-point scale, where 1 = *not at all* and 4 = *very*, mothers and fathers reported on their spiritual experiences. Alphas were .86 for mothers and .88 for fathers.

**Results**

**Analytic Strategy**
To examine the trajectory of coparenting satisfaction during youth’s adolescence, we used a multi-level modeling (MLM) strategy. This approach extends multiple regression to account for dependencies in the data (i.e., correlations within person over time, correlations between parents in the same family). Another advantage of MLM is that it provides for the use of unbalanced data, meaning that it is not necessary for every individual to be assessed at the same point in time, and individuals can differ in age at the first point of data collection. This feature of MLM allowed us to use youth age as the index of time, despite age differences at each time of measurement, and in doing so, we were able to detect developmental patterns of interest that might have been obscured by year of assessment. In addition, an MLM framework provides for the use of cases with one or more observations missing at random (Raudenbush & Byrk, 2002), allowing us to include all 192 families in these analyses.

We began by testing a three level model for coparenting satisfaction using SAS Proc Mixed, version 9.2. The Level 1, or within-person model, captured changes in coparenting satisfaction in relation to time-varying covariates. To describe patterns of change in coparenting satisfaction as a function of youth age, we included a linear age polynomial at Level 1. To understand whether changes in youth’s puberty development, economic strain, discrimination experiences, and income coincided with changes in coparenting satisfaction, we also included time-varying covariates at Level 1. These were group-mean centered, or centered around each individual’s cross-time mean.

At Level 2 we included predictors at the between parent, or within-family, level. The Level 2 model accounts for dependencies between members of the same family. By including both mothers and fathers in the same analysis we were able to test the moderating role of parent gender, that is, whether the trajectory of coparenting change differed for mothers versus fathers; here we included the cross-level interaction between the linear age polynomial and parent gender to determine whether mothers and fathers differed in their patterns of change. The variables included at Level 2 were cross-time means, or time-invariant characteristics, that differed for mothers and fathers (i.e., education level and religiosity). In addition, to document how changes in parents’ sociocultural experiences were linked to changes in coparenting satisfaction, we included the cross-time means for each individual on the time-varying
predictors (from Level 1). That is, because the Level 2 cross-time means reflect all *between-individual* variation, including these means limits the time-varying versions of the variables to *explaining within-individual variation over time*, beyond stable individual differences (Jacobs et al., 2002; Raudenbush & Byrk, 2002).

Level 3 estimates are between-family characteristics, that is, characteristics that are shared by mothers and fathers and do not change over time. Here we included offspring gender.

In these analyses, parent gender was coded 0 = father, 1 = mother, and youth gender was coded 0 = girl, 1 = boy. In the case of significant interactions by gender, to test the slopes, we reran the same models treating mothers and girls as the reference group (i.e., dummy coding instead of effect coding). In reporting the results we focus on significant effects at \( p < .05 \), however, we consider trend-level effects (\( p < .10 \)) when these were consistent with hypotheses or results from prior research. We begin by describing the results of preliminary analyses. We first examined correlations between study variables and stability coefficients for coparenting satisfaction. We next described longitudinal change in coparenting satisfaction, and differences in change as a function of parent and youth gender and youth puberty development. Then we examined the links between sociocultural stressors and supports and mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting satisfaction.

**Preliminary Analyses**

In preliminary analyses we examined the correlations between the predictor variables to understand whether stressors could be combined in one model and supports examined in a separate model. Correlations, means, and standard deviations for predictors are presented in Table 3.1. In general, correlations were small to modest in size, allowing us to combine stressors in one model and supports in another. Stability coefficients, means, and standard deviations for mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting satisfaction are presented in Table 3.2.

**Longitudinal Change in Coparenting Satisfaction and the Moderating Effects of Parent Gender, Youth Gender, and Youth Puberty Development**
A preliminary series of MLMs were conducted to examine the overall growth trajectory of coparenting satisfaction across youth’s adolescence. The index of time (i.e., youth age) was centered at age 11, the mean age across youth across all study time points. Based on AIC and BIC fit statistics and the significance of variance components, a model with a random intercept and fixed linear term was chosen as the initial model to describe change in coparenting satisfaction. In this model, the overall linear change effect was not significant, $\gamma = -.06, SE = .03, ns$.

To understand the implications of parent and youth characteristics for changes in coparenting satisfaction, we next tested a model including youth and parent gender, as well as the time-varying effect of youth puberty development as predictors of coparenting satisfaction. With respect to parent gender, a significant Linear age X Parent gender interaction emerged for coparenting satisfaction, $\gamma = .12, SE = .06, p < .05$. On average, fathers’ coparenting satisfaction declined significantly over the course of youth’s adolescence, $\gamma = -.11, SE = .05, p < .05$, whereas the change in mothers’ coparenting satisfaction was not significant, $\gamma = -.003, SE = .05, ns$ (Figure 3.1). Neither the main effect of youth gender nor the interaction between youth gender and parent gender were significant, indicating that having a son versus a daughter was not a factor in coparenting satisfaction for mothers or for fathers. The time-varying effect of puberty development was also non-significant, meaning that, beyond youth age, puberty did not account for change in coparenting satisfaction for mothers or fathers. We also tested the moderating role of youth gender given differences in the timing of pubertal development for boys and girls, but this effect was also non-significant. Retaining interactions that are not significant contributes to an increase in standard errors (Aiken & West, 1991), so these non-significant interactions were not included in further analyses, and only the Linear age X Parent gender interaction was retained.

**The Role of Sociocultural Stressors and Supports for Change in Coparenting Satisfaction**

Our next step was to test whether the stressors of economic strain and racial discrimination (shown in Table 3.3, Model A) and the supports of socioeconomic resources and religiosity (Table 3.3, Model B) were related to changes in coparenting satisfaction, and whether these links differed for mothers
versus fathers. There were no significant effects of Level 1 (time-varying) predictors; rather all effects reported below are Level 2, cross-time averages. The full model including all significant main effects and interactions with parent gender is shown in Table 3.3, Model C.

**Sociocultural stressors and coparenting satisfaction.** As a main effect, *economic strain* was negatively related to coparenting satisfaction, and this association did not differ for mothers and fathers. Consistent with our expectations about discrimination as a stressor, the main effect of *racial discrimination* for coparenting satisfaction was negative, but was qualified by an interaction with parent gender. Follow-up analyses revealed that discrimination was negatively associated with fathers’ coparenting satisfaction, $\gamma = -.32, SE = .15, p < .05$, but unrelated to coparenting satisfaction for mothers, $\gamma = .15, SE = .20, ns$ (Figure 3.2).

**Sociocultural supports and coparenting satisfaction.** With respect to the role of supports for coparenting satisfaction, inconsistent with our expectations, there was a negative main effect of education on coparenting satisfaction. The main effect of income on coparenting satisfaction was positive, but this effect was qualified by parent gender. Inconsistent with our prediction that income was a resource that would support coparenting satisfaction, income was negatively related to mothers’ coparenting satisfaction, $\gamma = -.003, SE = .001, p < .05$; for fathers, in contrast, results were consistent with our hypothesis in that income was positively associated with coparenting satisfaction, $\gamma = .002, SE = .001, p < .05$ (Figure 3.3). In line with expectations about religiosity as a support for coparenting satisfaction, religiosity was positively related to coparenting, and this effect did not differ for mothers and fathers.

To better understand the counterintuitive findings related to mothers’ income and coparenting satisfaction, we conducted post-hoc analyses. Some prior research suggests that mothers who earn more than their husbands are less satisfied with their marriages (Furdyna, Tucker, & James, 2008; Teachman, 2010). Extending this idea to coparenting, we tested whether mothers’ coparenting satisfaction differed for women who earned more than their husbands as compared to those whose incomes were less than their husbands’. We first created two groups, (1) mothers earned more than their husbands, and (2) fathers
earned more than their wives. Within each group, we conducted a paired samples $t$-test for mean level differences in mothers’ versus fathers’ coparenting satisfaction. In line with our post-hoc hypothesis about the role of relative earnings, mothers who earned more than their husbands were the least satisfied with coparenting (Table 3.4). Second, looking between families, we compared mothers who earned more than their husbands to mothers who earned less than their husbands and found that in families where women earned more, mothers were less satisfied with coparenting relative to mothers in families where their husbands earned more.

As a final step, we included all significant main effects and interaction terms in the same model to understand the relative significance of these stressors and supports for coparenting satisfaction for mothers and fathers. As shown in Table 3.3 (Model C), all effects that were significant in separate models reached trend level or better, suggesting that the implications of these stressors and supports for coparenting satisfaction were robust and relatively independent.

**Discussion**

The overarching goal of this research was to examine changes in coparenting satisfaction as a function of offspring’s development through adolescence, and the sociocultural factors that were related to coparenting in two-parent African American families. Our first hypothesis was that adolescence would present new challenges to coparental and, thus, that coparenting satisfaction would decline as a function of youth’s age. In partial support of this hypothesis, fathers’ coparenting satisfaction declined over time. In contrast, mothers’ coparenting satisfaction remained stable across youth’s adolescence. Fathers’ satisfaction may be more closely tied to changes in the family because their family roles and relationships are less scripted than those of mothers (e.g., Brody, Arias, & Fincham, 1996; Jouriles and Farris, 1992). Consistent with prior research that fathers have more positive evaluations of their coparenting relationships than mothers, fathers were more satisfied relative to their wives when offspring were preadolescents (i.e. at age 8), however by the time youth reached adolescence (i.e., age 14) the gap between parents’ satisfaction closed. Such findings underscore the idea that adolescence imposes challenges on mothers’ and fathers’ efforts to coordinate their parenting.
There were no significant effects of youth’s pubertal development or youth gender for coparenting satisfaction. The age-related changes in youth that can negatively affect coparenting, including increased autonomy, problem behaviors, and more time with peers, may very well precede puberty. Puberty is confounded with a range of changes – social, cognitive, emotional – and it may be that age is a more powerful marker of the challenges that accompany adolescence. Past research offers mixed evidence for the role of offspring gender in coparenting: Some work finds that having a son versus a daughter plays a role in coparenting (e.g., Margolin et al., 2001), whereas some studies find no link between child gender and coparenting (e.g., Stright & Bales, 2003). In our sample, gender was not a factor for coparenting satisfaction but further research is needed to understand when and for whom offspring gender plays a role in coparenting evaluations.

In general, our hypotheses about economic strain and racial discrimination as stressors for coparenting were supported, particularly for fathers. Perception of economic strain was related to less satisfaction with coparenting for both parents, even after accounting for parents’ income and education. Racial discrimination was also a significant factor in fathers’ coparenting satisfaction, but discrimination was not related to mothers’ coparenting satisfaction. On average, mothers experienced discrimination less frequently than fathers, and low levels in combination with low variability in this measure may be factors in the non-significant association with mothers’ coparenting satisfaction.

Findings related to the role of socio-economic resources for mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting satisfaction were less consistent with our expectations. In contrast to the idea that resources would benefit coparenting satisfaction, and contrary to prior research on coparenting support with White coparents (Stright & Bales, 2003) and African American non-resident fathers (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2009), our findings suggested that education level was inversely related to coparenting satisfaction. This association did not differ by parent; mothers and fathers who attained higher levels of education were less satisfied with their coparenting relationship compared to parents who had lower levels of education. Research on work-family spillover reveals that highly educated parents have the highest levels of negative spillover from work to family life (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002). Drawing on this idea, it
may be that parents who were more educated experienced stressors in work domains that interfered with family life, and in turn, that disrupted coparenting satisfaction. Given the inverse relations between education level and family involvement (e.g., Shelton & John, 1993) it is also possible that parents who have higher education are more involved with work and less involved with family which, in turn, has negative implications for their evaluations of coparenting. Currently, no research has examined links between work characteristics and coparenting so these ideas are speculative. In light of documented links between work and family dynamics, however, future research should explore the implications of stressors related to work and education for coparenting experiences.

It was surprising to discover that income was a support for coparenting satisfaction for fathers, but that for mothers, higher earnings put them at risk for less coparenting satisfaction. Reflection on this finding led us to a post-hoc hypothesis that mothers who earned more relative to their husbands could be assuming the roles of both breadwinner and homemaker, resulting in lower coparenting satisfaction. Our hypothesis was confirmed in that mothers who earned more relative to their spouses were less satisfied with coparenting compared to all other mothers and fathers in the sample. The idea that breaking traditional gender roles has negative implications for mothers and not fathers has been documented in empirical studies of marital stability among women. Teachman (2010) found that White women who earned a greater share of family income relative to their husbands were at higher risk than other women to experience marital disruptions. In the face of a body of research that shows income to be an important resource for families and individuals (e.g., Conger et al., 2002), this finding sheds light on the importance of going beyond between-family comparisons to examine within family differences in individuals’ experiences and their family dynamics, including coparenting.

This study filled some important gaps in the literature on coparenting and on family systems dynamics in African American families by examining changes in coparenting satisfaction in later phases of youth development, and by placing our understanding of the coparenting of African American families within a sociocultural context. By examining changes as a function of youth age we were able to go beyond the typically used wave of data collection to understand changes in coparenting that were tied to
the development of a family member. Another key strength of this study was its focus on coparenting evaluations in African American two-parent families. The literature on coparenting in African American families has paid little attention to mothers and fathers -- who are different in important ways from non-marital coparenting figures such as a parent and a grandparent. Further, by using an MLM framework, we were able to examine both differences in coparenting satisfaction between families that varied in sociocultural stressors and supports, and also to test mother-father differences in patterns of associations.

In the face of its contributions, this study is not without limitations. Like prior research on coparenting (e.g., Margolin et al., 2001), we relied on parents’ reports of their coparenting satisfaction and experiences of stressors and supports. In addition, coparenting was not measured with reference to a focal child. Just as parenting processes are not the same for all children in the family, it will be important to understand differences in mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting evaluations vis-à-vis each child in the family. Although having a sample of two-parent African American families is rare in the family literature, the families in this study come from a circumscribed geographical location and were relatively socioeconomically advantaged. This work should be replicated in a nationally representative sample.

Findings from this study contribute significantly to the literature, however, in showing that coparenting changes for fathers when they face new challenges that accompany adolescent development. The fact that mothers and fathers experienced coparenting differently suggests that understanding this fundamental family dynamic in African American coparents, who are also couples, is an important direction for further research. Findings also document key sociocultural factors that are relevant for coparenting in African American families; in using an ethnic-homogenous design, this work goes beyond race/ethnicity as a marker variable to demonstrate variability in normative family processes within African American families. Like other family processes, coparenting is affected by stressor and support experiences emanating from outside of the family, and also by family characteristics. Taken together, the results highlight the significance of examining coparenting changes as a function of offspring’s development, studying differences within families, and examining coparenting within its sociocultural context.
References


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Sterrett, E., Jones, D.J., Forehand, R., & Garai, E. (2010). Predictors of coparenting relationship quality in


Table 3.1. Means (and SDs) and correlations among stressor and support variables for mothers (above diagonal), fathers (below diagonal) and correlations between mothers’ and fathers’ reports (on diagonal).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>Mother M</th>
<th>Mother SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic strain</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>-.09**</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>(2.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial discrimination</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.09**</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>(.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.10**</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>14.73</td>
<td>(1.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>$35,556</td>
<td>(24,830)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household size</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>(1.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>.12**</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.07*</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>(.51)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Father M: 5.41 1.82 14.29   $55,996 4.83 3.59
Father SD: (2.08) (.64) (2.37) (48,140) (1.30) (.60)

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01.

Table 3.2. Means (and SDs), and stability coefficients for coparenting satisfaction for mothers (above diagonal) and father (below diagonal), and correlations between parents’ reports of coparenting satisfaction (on diagonal).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Time 1 Age:10.38</th>
<th>Time 2 Age:11.43</th>
<th>Time 3 Age:12.55</th>
<th>Mother M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>7.07(1.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.71**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>7.13(1.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>7.16(1.83)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Father M (SD): 7.42(1.59) 7.38(1.57) 7.33(1.59)

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01.
Table 3.3. Coefficients from MLMs predicting changes in coparenting satisfaction as a function of child age, and predicted by sociocultural stressors and supports.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model A: Stressors</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model B: Supports</th>
<th></th>
<th>Full Model</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$\gamma$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$\gamma$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>7.26**</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>7.31**</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>7.31**</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth age</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.08†</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 2:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent gender$^a$</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth age X Parent gender</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>-.32*</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.31†</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic strain</td>
<td>-.14**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.002*</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination X Parent gender</td>
<td>.48*</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.41†</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education X Parent gender</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income X Parent gender</td>
<td>-.005**</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>-.005**</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 3:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth gender$^b$</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Random effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1:</td>
<td>1.28**</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.26**</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.29**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2:</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3:</td>
<td>1.03**</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.04**</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.06**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $^a$ Fathers are the reference group.

$^b$ Youth gender is coded 0 = girl, 1 = boy.

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$
Table 3.4. Means (and SDs) for post-hoc comparison of mothers’ and fathers’ relative income for their coparenting satisfaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mother higher income</th>
<th>Father higher income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 45</td>
<td>n = 139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mother Coparenting Satisfaction</strong></td>
<td>6.85&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.18&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Father Coparenting Satisfaction</strong></td>
<td>7.46&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.26&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Means with different subscripts are significantly different from each other, p < .05*
Figure 3.1. *Interaction between the linear effect of change and in coparenting satisfaction and parent gender.*

![Graph showing coparenting satisfaction over youth age](image)

*Note.* †*p < .10* ‡*p < .05*, ‡‡*p < .01

Figure 3.2. *Interaction between racial discrimination and parent gender for coparenting satisfaction.*

![Graph showing coparenting satisfaction over racial discrimination](image)

*Note.* †*p < .10* ‡*p < .05*, ‡‡*p < .01
Figure 3.3. Interaction between income and parent gender for coparenting satisfaction.

Note. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$
Chapter 4.

Investigating the Reciprocal Influences between Dimensions of Coparenting and Adolescent Adjustment

Abstract

Taking a family systems perspective, this study assessed two dimensions of coparenting in families of adolescents, shared decision-making and shared time with offspring, and examined the bidirectional associations between these coparenting dimensions and boys’ and girls’ risky behaviors and depressive symptoms across four time points (six years) in adolescence. Participants were 201 mothers, fathers, and adolescents ($M = 11.83$, $SD = .55$ years of age at Time 1). On average, parents of boys made more decisions together than parents of girls, and mother-father-adolescent time together with no one else present was relatively infrequent. Parents’ shared decision-making was linked to less risky behavior for boys one year later, and boys’ and girls’ risky behavior predicted less shared decision-making by their parents one year later. There were no significant links between parents’ shared decision making and youth depressive symptoms. Parents’ shared time with adolescents was bidirectionally related to youths’ risky behaviors and depressive symptoms, and these links were present earlier in adolescence for girls than for boys. We discuss these dimensions of coparenting as important family processes during adolescence and suggest directions for future research on coparenting in families of adolescents.
Coparenting, or the manner in which parental figures work together in their parenting roles, is a fundamental family systems dynamic (Feinberg, 2002). Research has focused on coparenting of young children as mothers and fathers navigate parenting challenges as a team for the first time (McHale, Kazali, Rotman, Talbot, Carleton, & Lieberman, 2004; Van Egeren, 2004). Offspring’s adolescence is another developmental period when parents face new challenges: Increasing autonomy, independence, and risk for behavior problems may require parents to develop new parenting strategies (Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, & Mounts, 1994), and as a result, parents of adolescents may also find themselves renegotiating their coparenting relationship to get their parental practices onto the same page. Scholars recognize that conceptualizations of coparenting during early childhood may not generalize to families with adolescents (Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007), but little is known about coparenting later in development. Expanding the scope of coparenting literature, our first goal was to describe changes in two dimensions of coparenting that may be relevant to adolescent development – parents’ shared decision-making and shared time with sons and daughters – across six years of adolescence. Given the earlier onset of adolescence for girls relative to boys, and the different practices that parents enact with sons versus daughters (Bumpus, Crouter, & McHale, 2001), we also explored gender differences in coparenting dimensions and their patterns of change from early to late adolescence.

In addition to assessing dimensions of coparenting in families of adolescents, we also examined potential bidirectional influences between coparenting and adolescent boys’ and girls’ adjustment. A cornerstone of family systems theory is the idea that family subsystems are mutually influential; from this perspective, development in adolescence may contribute to novel social dynamics between parents and offspring. Research has shown that mothers’ and fathers’ parenting and coparenting have implications for child (Schoppe et al., 2001) and adolescent (Feinberg et al., 2007) adjustment. In contrast, little is known about the other direction of effect, that is, the implications of youth adjustment for coparenting, and this is especially true for families of adolescents given the lack of coparenting research on this developmental period. Research on the role of adolescent adjustment for family dynamics shows, however, that
adolescents’ behavior problems interfere with effective parenting (Kerr & Stattin, 2000) and marital harmony (Cui et al., 2007). Our second goal was to extend this work to coparenting by examining the bidirectional links between coparenting and adolescent externalizing and internalizing problems.

**Coparenting in Families of Adolescents**

Coparenting during adolescence may be quite different from coparenting dynamics in families with young children. Whereas coparenting young children requires a high level of moment-to-moment cooperation, this type of teamwork is thought to be less important in coparenting pre-adolescents who are developing independence from their parents (Margolin, et al., 2001). Instead, from a developmental perspective, coparenting that reflects inter-parental teamwork around decision-making and parental involvement may become increasingly important in response to the increasing autonomy of adolescence. Accordingly, in this study we focused on two features of coparenting, parents’ shared decision-making and their shared time with their adolescent child (or “triadic time”). We assessed parents’ shared decision-making vis-à-vis their adolescents’ activities, social life, health, and school and family responsibilities, reasoning that this dimension of coparenting reflects parents being on the same page at a time when autonomy granting becomes a key childrearing issue (Collins et al., 1997). With respect to triadic time, we measured mothers’, fathers’, and adolescents’ time together in shared activities with no one else present. We focused on time when only these three family members were present in an effort to best capture parents’ joint involvement with their child when adolescents might have the best opportunity of experiencing their parents’ coparenting without distraction by other social partners. Although adolescents spend less time at home and are more involved with the world beyond the family (Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996; Youniss & Smollar, 1985), time spent with parents remains important for adolescent adjustment (Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2007; Crouter et al., 2004; McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 2001).

Adolescent gender may have implications for both coparenting and youth adjustment. Prior research reveals mixed results on the role of gender in coparenting. Although gender differences are not evident in studies of young children (Floyd & Zmich, 1991; Stright & Bales, 2003), among school-aged
children, boys tend to be caught in the middle of inter-parental discord more often than girls (Margolin et al., 2001), and boys may be at greater risk for exposure to coparenting conflict (McHale, 1995). Thus, the role of youth gender in coparenting may change across development. And, consistent with a gender intensification perspective, the role of gender for family dynamics and youth adjustment may become increasingly salient in adolescence (Hill & Lynch, 1983). Indeed, prior work reveals gender differences in parent-adolescent relationship qualities and parents’ autonomy granting (Bumpus et al., 2001). In addition, youth adjustment problems become increasingly gendered, with boys experiencing a faster increase in externalizing behavior (Zahn-Waxler, 1993), and girls exhibiting acceleration in internalizing symptoms (Angold & Rutter, 1992).

Evidence for Reciprocal Relations between Coparenting and Adolescent Adjustment

Research on coparenting establishes that inter-parental dynamics are important for early childhood adjustment: Low levels of coparental consistency and support have been linked to higher externalizing behavior problems among pre-school aged children (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Schoppe et al., 2001), and discrepancies between mothers’ versus fathers’ warmth toward their child were related to more internalizing problems for school-aged sons and daughters and externalizing behavior problems for sons (McConnell & Kerig, 2002). From the smaller set of studies that have examined coparenting in families of adolescents, there is some evidence that coparental conflict about childrearing issues puts youth at risk for externalizing behavior problems (Baril, Crouter, & McHale, 2007) and delinquency (Feinberg et al., 2007). Less well understood are the implications of coparenting dimensions that reflect coordinated parenting for adolescent adjustment. We expanded on the literature by testing whether shared decision-making and triadic time were related to fewer adolescent behavior problems.

There is little empirical evidence of child influences on coparenting (Lindsey, Caldera, & Colwell, 2005; Stright & Bales, 2003). However, given adolescents’ increasingly active role in family processes, they also may be influential in coparenting dynamics. In support of the family systems tenet that subsystems within families are mutually influential, we draw on research that documents the role of youth-driven effects for family functioning. There is evidence that adolescent behavior problems interfere
with parental control and monitoring (Kerr & Stattin, 2000), and that increased delinquent behavior diminishes parental knowledge (Laird, Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 2003). Such findings suggest that parents may respond to adolescents’ behavior problems by withdrawing. One study examined the role of youth behavior problems for coparenting. Cui and colleagues (2007) found that adolescent internalizing and externalizing behaviors exacerbated inter-parental conflict about childrearing, which in turn, had a negative impact on marital satisfaction. This work makes an important contribution to what is known about coparenting, lending support to the idea that adolescent behaviors can interfere with marital functioning vis-à-vis coparenting dynamics. We built on this study and other past research by examining the longitudinal associations between adolescent adjustment and dimensions of coparenting. Specifically, using four waves of data we tested two directions of effect to determine whether youth adjustment predicted coparenting, and/or whether dimensions of coparenting predicted adolescent risky behaviors and depressive symptoms, and we examined whether there were gender differences in these associations.

The Present Study

In sum, this study expanded the scope of research on coparenting in addressing two goals. The first was to explore the course of two dimensions of coparenting, shared decision-making and triadic time with daughters versus sons across six years of adolescent development. Given the lack of prior research on coparenting during adolescence and mixed evidence for the role of child gender and coparenting, these analyses were exploratory. Our second goal was to examine the reciprocal links between dimensions of coparenting and adolescent risky behaviors and depressive symptoms and test for gender differences in patterns of association. Based on prior research, primarily in early and middle childhood, we expected that mothers’ and fathers’ shared decision-making and triadic time would be related to fewer adolescent risky behaviors and depressive symptoms. In turn, based on research showing that adolescent adjustment problems can disrupt inter-parental dynamics, we expected that risky behavior and depressive symptoms would have negative implications for coparenting practices. Finally, given increasing gender differences in adjustment problems in adolescence, we expected links would be most evident between coparenting and girls’ depression symptoms and between coparenting and boys’ risky behavior.
Method

Participants

Data came from a longitudinal study of family relationships and individual development in 201 two-parent European American families with offspring in middle childhood and adolescence. Families were recruited via letters sent home from schools in small urban and rural districts in a northeastern state. The letters described the study and criteria for participation: having an intact marriage and a firstborn child in the fourth or fifth grade, with a sibling who was 1 to 4 years younger. Interested families returned a postcard, and over 90% of these families agreed to participate.

Data collection began in 1995-1996. To capture changes in coparenting and adjustment across multiple years of adolescence our analyses use data from mothers, fathers, and offspring at years 2, 3, 6, and 7 of the study (referred to as Times 1, 2, 3, and 4, hereon) when offspring were approximately 12, 13, 16, and 17 years old, respectively. Sample attrition was minimal: Over the study period 10 families withdrew and an additional 4 youth and 13 fathers did not participate at wave 7, and were missing data on some occasions as a result. An analysis of variance determined that parents and youth with missing occasions of measurement did not differ from those with complete data on their reports of any variables of interest in this study so all 201 families were retained in the analyses.

For the present analyses, we included reports from mothers, fathers, and youth. At Time 1, youth averaged 11.83 years of age ($SD = .55$), and ranged in age from 10.41 to 13.72. The sample was approximately equally divided by gender ($n = 103$ girls). Families were generally working and middle class. At Time 1, the mean education level for mothers was 14.63 years ($SD = 2.11$) and fathers’ education, 14.72 years ($SD = 2.40$), with a score of 14 representing vocational training/some college and a score of 15 representing Associates degree. Almost all parents were employed (92% of mothers and 100% of fathers). Fathers worked an average of 47.36 hours per week ($SD = 11.11$), and mothers, 29.28 hours per week ($SD = 15.23$). At Time 1, the mean household income was $63,355 ($SD = 31,471$). The average family size was 4.54 ($SD = .76$).

Procedure
We used two data collection procedures. First, we conducted annual home interviews with mothers, fathers, and youth. Informed consent/assent was obtained, and families received a $100 honorarium at Times 1 and 2, and $200 at Times 3 and 4. Then, family members were questioned separately about their family relationship experiences and personal qualities during the past year unless a different time frame is noted. Interviews generally lasted two to three hours.

The second data collection procedure was used to obtain information about youth’s daily activities. In the 3-4 weeks following annual home interviews, we conducted 7 telephone interviews (5 on weekday evenings, 2 on weekend evenings). During these calls, youth reported on their daily activities outside of regular school hours; the type of activity, how long the activity lasted, and with whom they had engaged in each activity were recorded. Calls were scheduled in the evening so that youth could report on almost all activities that occurred during that day. Three youth did not complete any phone calls, and 25 youth were missing some phone data by wave 7 of the study. Youth with missing phone data did not differ from youth with complete data on any background characteristics.

Measures

Shared decision-making was assessed at each time point using an adapted measure of adolescent decision-making (Dornbusch et al., 1985). Mothers and fathers were asked to “think about how decisions have been made during the past year in different areas of your child’s life”, and indicated the family member(s) who made decisions in each of eight domains: chores, appearance, homework/schoolwork, social life, bedtime/curfew, health, choosing activities, and money. Response options were: (1) child alone, (2) mother, (3) father, (4) both parents, (5) father and child, (6) mother and child, (7) parents and child, (8) other person(s), and (9) nobody. Because “other person” and “nobody” were never endorsed, these options were not included in scoring. For the analyses, responses were coded as (0) only one parent was involved in the decision (i.e., mother, father, father and child, mother and child), and (1) parents were the same in their decision-making involvement (i.e., child alone, both parents, both parents and child), and summed across domains to create an index ranging from 0 (parents made no decisions together in any domain) to 8 (parents made decisions together in every domain). Mothers’ and fathers’ ratings were
moderately to highly correlated, ranging from $r = .53$ to $r = .78$ across phases, so we averaged their scores to create one indicator of shared parental shared decision-making at each year of the study.

**Triadic time** shared by parents and youth was measured using youth reports from the nightly telephone interviews. We aggregated youth’s reports across all activities and all 7 calls to create a measure of the time (in minutes) that youth spent with both their mothers and fathers with no one else present.

**Risky behaviors** were assessed using the 18-item Risky Behavior Scale (Eccles & Barber, 1990). Youth reported on the extent of their involvement in risk taking behaviors (e.g., “Drink alcohol without your parents’ permission”) using a scale of 1 = *never* to 4 = *more than 10 times in the past year*. Items were summed with higher scores indicating more risk taking behaviors, and Cronbach alphas ranged from .72 to .87.

**Depressive symptoms** were measured using the Children’s Depression Inventory (CDI; Kovacs, 1985). For 26 items (an item on suicide ideation was dropped from the original scale), youth were asked to choose among three sentences, the one that best described them over the past week (e.g., “I am sad once in a while” or “I am sad many times” or “I am sad many times”). Items were summed, with higher scores indicating more depressive symptoms. Across time points, alphas ranged from .77 to .88.

**Youth and family background characteristics**, reported by parents at Time 1, included youth age, youth gender, parent education level, family income, and household size.

**Results**

**Coparenting in Families of Adolescents**

The results are organized around our research goals. Our first step was to describe patterns of change in dimensions of coparenting. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 4.1 and indicate that parents’ shared decision-making was highly stable over time, but triadic time was less so. Further, correlations between parents’ shared decision-making and triadic time were generally non-significant, lending support to our decision to treat them as separate dimensions of coparenting.
Given dependencies in the data across time points, we used a multilevel model (MLM) approach to detect patterns of linear and quadratic change in coparenting for boys and girls. This approach also allowed us to directly test for gender effects by including both boys and girls in the same models. In the case of shared decision-making, the means indicated that in most cases (6/8 domains), parents were similarly involved. The MLM analysis revealed a significant effect of gender, $\beta = .48$, $SE = .24$, $t = 1.98$, $p < .05$, such that parents of boys shared more decisions than parents of girls, and a trend for the linear time term emerged, $\beta = -.11$, $SE = .06$, $t = 1.77$, $p < .10$, suggesting that parents’ shared decision-making tended to decline over the four years of study (see means in Table 1). The interaction between gender and time was not significant. Turning to triadic time, there was substantial variability in the amount of triadic time families spent together, with reported triadic time ranging from 0 to 580 minutes per 7 days. Because the triadic time index was skewed, a square root transformation was used in all analyses. No significant main or interactions effects for gender and time emerged for triadic time.

Preliminary MLM analyses also revealed that boys reported more risky behavior than girls overall, $\beta = 2.59$, $SE = .83$, $t = 3.12$, $p < .01$ and that there was linear increase in risky behavior across the four years of study, $\beta = 2.28$, $SE = .21$, $t = 11.11$, $p < .01$. In the case of depressive symptoms, a linear increase in depressive symptoms, $\beta = 1.10$, $SE = .18$, $t = 6.15$, $p < .01$, was qualified by an interaction with gender, $\beta = -.61$, $SE = .26$, $t = -2.38$, $p < .01$, and follow-ups revealed a stronger significant linear increase in symptoms for girls, $\beta = 1.10$, $SE = .19$, $t = 5.86$, $p < .01$, than for boys, $\beta = .49$, $SE = .17$, $t = 2.83$, $p < .01$.

**Bidirectional Associations between Coparenting Dimensions and Adolescent Adjustment**

We used cross-lagged path analysis models to address our second goal of measuring the associations between coparenting and adolescent adjustment. Using the AMOS 18 statistical package, we estimated four separate path models with cross-lagged associations between coparenting and adolescent adjustment. We used Full Information Maximum Likelihood to handle missing data. To control for stability in each coparenting and adjustment dimension over time, we included paths from earlier scores
to later scores (e.g., coparenting at Time 3 was regressed on coparenting at Time 2, etc.). Including these cross-lagged pathways allowed us to determine whether differences in dimensions of coparenting and adjustment were associated with each other across time, independent of both stability and any cross-lagged contributions of the other variables. The residuals for coparenting and adjustment dimensions were also correlated within each time point (e.g., residual for coparenting at Time 2 was correlated with the residual for adjustment at Time 2, etc.). This accounts for the time-specific association between coparenting and adjustment, independent of the association between the same two variables at the previous time point. To understand whether offspring gender moderated these associations, multi-group models were estimated for girls and boys. In cases where the change in $\chi^2$ test indicated that model fit was significantly poorer when paths were constrained to be equivalent across gender, we analyzed data for girls and boys in separate models. We also tested each model controlling for parent education. Models with and without the education control yielded the same pattern of results, and therefore education was not included in the final models.

**Shared decision-making.** The first model tested the cross-lagged associations between shared decision-making and risky behaviors (Figure 4.1). To determine whether path coefficients for boys and girls should be estimated in separate models, we first constrained the variances of each variable to be equal across gender. The change in $\chi^2$ test indicated that model fit was significantly poorer when paths were constrained to be equivalent, $\Delta \chi^2 (12) = 25.90, p < .01$, so data for boys and girls were analyzed separately. Model fit was assessed using conventional rules (e.g., Kline, 2005). Likely due to the relatively small sample size, the $\chi^2$ was significant for some models when other indices pointed towards adequate fit for all reported models. Nonetheless, findings should be interpreted with caution.

Starting with boys, model fit was adequate, $\chi^2 (12, N = 98) = 35.88, p < .01$; CFI = .95; and RMSEA = .12. As Figure1 shows, shared decision-making and risky behaviors were stable over time. There was a significant negative association between shared decision-making at age 16 and boys’ risky behaviors at age 17, suggesting that parents’ shared decision-making protected against increased risky
behaviors in late adolescence for boys. With respect to the influence of boys’ adjustment on coparenting, there was a marginal negative link between boys’ risky behaviors at age 13 and parents’ shared decision-making at age 16, suggesting that boys’ behavior problems may interfere with this type of coparenting.

The model for girls was a good fit to the data, $\chi^2 (12, N = 103) = 21.96, p = .04$; CFI = .97; and RMSEA = .08. Again, parents’ shared decision-making and risky behaviors were stable over time, but there were no significant effects of shared-decision making for girls’ risky behaviors. Similar to the finding for boys, girls’ risky behavior at age 13 was significantly related to less parental shared decision-making when girls were 16, indicating that girls’ risky behavior disrupted this dimension of coparenting.

Model 2 examined cross-lagged associations between shared decision-making and depressive symptoms (Figure 4.2). Again, we constrained the variances to be equal across gender; according to the change in $\chi^2$ test, model fit was not significantly poorer when paths were constrained, $\Delta \chi^2 (12) = 16.45, p = .17$, so paths for boys and girls were estimated in the same model. Model fit was good, $\chi^2 (12, N = 201) = 17.94, p = .04$; CFI = .98; and RMSEA = .07. Shared decision-making and depressive symptoms were stable across time; however there were no significant cross-lagged paths, indicating that shared decision-making and depressive symptoms were not related over time.

**Triadic time.** Models 3 and 4 show results for the cross-lagged associations involving triadic time. Model 3 tested cross-lagged associations between triadic time and risky behaviors (Figure 4.3). The change in $\chi^2$ test indicated that model fit was significantly poorer when paths for boys and girls were constrained to be equivalent, $\Delta \chi^2 (12) = 34.26, p < .01$, so data for boys and girls were analyzed separately.

For boys, model fit was adequate, $\chi^2 (12, N = 98) = 24.66, p = .02$; CFI = .94; and RMSEA = .10. Triadic time was not entirely stable across time points; the amount of time boys’ spent with mothers and fathers at age 13 was not related to triadic time at age 16. However, triadic time was stable across other time points, and there was stability in risky behavior across all time points. With respect to the implications of coparenting for risky behavior, in families with more triadic time at age 16, boys exhibited
less risky behavior at age 17. In addition, boys with more risky behavior problems at age 16 spent more triadic time with mothers and fathers at age 17.

The model was an excellent fit for girls, \( \chi^2 (12, N = 103) = 11.75, p = .47; \) CFI = 1.00; and RMSEA = .00. Similarly to boys, triadic time was not stable across time but risky behavior was. For girls, the pattern of significant cross-lagged effects was similar to the pattern for boys, but emerged earlier in development: Triadic time at age 12 was negatively related to girls’ risky behavior at age 13, whereas girls who exhibited more risky behavior at age 12 spent more triadic time with their parents at age 13. There was also a marginal negative link between triadic time at age 13 and girls’ risky behavior at age 16, suggesting that parents’ time with daughters may protect against girls’ risky behavior.

Model 4 tested the cross-lagged associations between triadic time and depressive symptoms (Figure 4.4). Again, the change in \( \chi^2 \) test indicated that model fit was significantly poorer when paths were constrained to be equivalent for boys and girls, \( \Delta \chi^2 (12) = 31.17, p < .01 \), so paths for boys and girls were estimated in separate models.

The model fit well to the data for boys, \( \chi^2 (12, N = 98) = 13.38, p = .15; \) CFI = .97; and RMSEA = .07. The same pattern of stability was evident for triadic time as in the previous model for boys, and depressive symptoms were stable over time. Boys’ triadic time at age 13 was positively related to depressive symptoms at age 16 but no other cross-lagged paths reached significance.

For girls, model fit was excellent, \( \chi^2 (12, N = 103) = 4.54, p = .87; \) CFI = 1.00; and RMSEA = .00. As in Model 3, triadic time was not stable over time for girls; the only significant link was between triadic time at age 12 and age 13. Depressive symptoms were stable across all time points. Girls who were more depressed at age 12 spent more triadic time with parents at age 13. In turn, girls who spent more triadic time with parents at age 13 had fewer depressive symptoms at age 16. This pattern of effects provides evidence for the protective role of triadic time for girls in early to mid-adolescence.

Discussion
A growing literature has established that coparenting is a fundamental family systems dynamic, with implications for infant and early childhood adjustment. The findings from this study are consistent with past work and suggest that coparenting, as measured by shared parental decision making and parents’ time together with their adolescent (triadic time), are linked in bidirectional ways with adolescents’ depressive symptoms and risky behaviors. This study adds to the literature by examining dimensions of coparenting that are relevant to families with adolescent sons and daughters, and by testing the role of youth behaviors for coparenting dynamics. Below, we review the findings, highlighting the ways in which this study advances understanding of coparenting during sons’ and daughters’ adolescence, and understanding of family systems dynamics, more generally.

**Coparenting in Families of Adolescents**

Our conceptualization of coparenting is rooted in a family systems perspective wherein family dynamics are understood as changing as a function of the development of family members. We focused on adolescence as a time of dramatic change, when parents and youth renegotiate their relationships around youth’s increasing autonomy and focus on the world beyond the home. We extended prior research on adolescents’ dyadic relationships with their parents and on coparenting research, which has targeted infants and young children, to examine coparenting processes in adolescence. We moved beyond prior research on coparenting conflicts in adolescence to study parents’ shared decision making and time together with their offspring as two dimensions of coparenting that would likely be susceptible to renegotiation during a period of increasing youth autonomy. Our findings revealed that, over the course of their offspring’s adolescence, parents generally appeared to be on the same page in their decision-making, and this was particularly the case for parents of sons, who shared approximately 80% of their decisions. Findings also showed that mothers, fathers, and adolescents spent relatively little triadic time together, averaging only 20 minutes per week across adolescence. Given our interest in coparenting as a systems construct and the implications of shared parental involvement, we only considered the time that mothers, fathers, and adolescents spent together exclusive of other family members. In our sample, all families had at least one additional younger child, and 60% of families had 2 additional younger children, which may
be one reason for infrequent triadic time. Mother-father-adolescent time together was nonetheless significant for adolescents’ adjustment.

**Bidirectional Links between Coparenting and Adolescent Adjustment**

In agreement with past research with young children, we found that both dimensions of coparenting protected against normative increases in adolescents’ risky behaviors, and that triadic time protected against depressive symptoms, even in this non-clinical sample of families in which adolescents reported low levels of internalizing and externalizing problems. Extending coparenting research to examine youth’s effect on their parents, findings also revealed that adolescent behavior problems had implications for coordinated parenting efforts in the domains of both decision making and shared time, but at different points in boys’ versus girls’ development. By controlling for associations at prior time points, we were able to confirm that the bidirectional links between coparenting and adolescent adjustment were specific to particular points in boys’ versus girls’ adolescence. Although studies focused on younger children have found little evidence that child gender plays a role in coparenting (e.g., Stright & Bales, 2003), our findings provide initial evidence that the links between coparenting and adolescent adjustment differ by adolescent gender, consistent with ideas about the intensification of gender socialization during these years. These findings are discussed in greater detail in the following pages.

Consistent with our expectation that parents’ being on the same page is related to better adolescent adjustment, we found that for 16-year old boys, parents’ *shared-decision-making* was related to fewer *risky behaviors* one year later. Whereas this prediction was supported for boys, parents’ shared decision making did not protect against risky behaviors for girls. One reason for this gender difference may be that parents expect boys to engage in more risky behaviors than girls, and in anticipation, took a more active role in coordinating their decisions about their sons. This interpretation is consistent with our finding that parents of sons shared more decisions than parents with daughters. Also in line with previous research, our results revealed that girls engaged in significantly fewer risky behaviors than boys (Zahn-Waxler, 1993); it may be that parents’ shared decision-making becomes protective once the frequency of risky behaviors reaches a certain threshold.
A second explanation of this gender difference has to do with girls’ orientations towards interpersonal relationships, an orientation that strengthens during adolescence (Maccoby, 1998). It may be that warm and supportive family relationships are more important in preventing girls’ risky behavior than specific parental practices such as autonomy granting. In addition, inter-parental dynamics may have stronger implications for boys’ adjustment. For example, prior research has shown that, compared to girls, boys are more affected by inter-parental conflict and are at greater risk for adjustment problems in response to low positivity between parents (Margolin et al., 2001; McHale, 1995). In the same way, boys also may be more influenced by positive interactions between coparents, including inter-parental decision-making.

With respect to the implications of adolescent adjustment for coparenting, risky behaviors at age 13 were negatively related to parents’ shared decision-making three years later, and this pattern was the same for boys and girls. Prior research suggests that parents of youth who experience more behavior problems have a tendency to withdraw from parenting responsibilities, including support and monitoring (Kerr & Stattin, 2000). Taking a step beyond individual parenting practices, results from this study provide initial evidence that adolescents’ behavior problems negatively impact parents’ ability to work together as a team.

In contrast to the findings for risky behaviors, there were no significant links between shared decision-making and depressive symptoms. In this way our findings corroborate prior work, which found that coparenting conflict was related to adolescent externalizing but not internalizing behaviors (Baril et al., 2007; Feinberg et al., 2007). As has been suggested in prior research (Feinberg et al., 2007) it is also possible that depressive symptoms are less visible to parents than risky behaviors, with the latter motivating parents’ efforts to work together. Taken together, these findings suggest that whether parents are on the same page in terms of decision-making is less important for adolescent internalizing problems, relative to coparenting efforts that include offspring more directly, such as time spent together.

Indeed, despite the fact that most mothers, fathers, and adolescents spent little time alone together, there were links between triadic time and both externalizing and internalizing problems. Triadic
time was protective for risky behaviors, but effects were significant at different points in boys’ and girls’ adolescence: For girls, more triadic time at ages 12 and 13 protected against later risky behaviors, whereas for boys, more triadic time at age 16 was related to fewer risky behaviors at age 17. Girls reported less risky behavior than boys at all points in adolescence. However because girls typically experience the changes of adolescence two years earlier than boys (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991), it may be that parents spent more time with girls early in adolescence in anticipation of heightened risky behaviors in daughters – rather than their actual onset. It is also possible that parents are more aware of their daughters’ risky behaviors early in adolescence whereas sons’ early risky behaviors may be viewed as more normative. Interestingly, like triadic time, parents’ shared decision-making for sons at age 16 was related to fewer risky behaviors one year later, lending support to the idea that coparenting coincides with other developments in boys’ and girls’ adolescence.

Differential timing in the links between coparenting and girls’ versus boys’ risky behaviors was also evident in the finding that risky behavior predicted triadic time one year later, at ages 12-13 for girls, but at ages 16-17 for boys. Despite boys’ greater involvement in risky behavior at age 13, it appears that the effects of triadic time were not protective for boys until risky behavior became more prevalent later in adolescence. Again, such findings suggest that parents have different thresholds of tolerance for the level of girls’ versus boys’ risky behaviors. Alternately, given girls’ value for interpersonal closeness, it is possible that lines of communications with girls were open and that triadic time had more of an impact on girls risky behaviors when these behaviors first emerged in early adolescence.

Differences for boys and girls were also evident in the patterns of association between triadic time and adolescents’ depressive symptoms. Consistent with the idea that girls’ stronger interpersonal orientations lead them to seek relational involvement in the face of stressors, girls’ depression at age 12 was positively associated with triadic time at age 13. In turn, when girls were 13 years old, triadic time was related to fewer depressive symptoms three years later, in line with the notion that shared time with parents is protective (Barnes et al., 2007). Consistent with prior research (Hankin & Ambramson, 2001), we found that the girls in this sample were at higher risk for depression symptoms than boys; as such
parents may be prepared to intervene together in response to girls’ internalizing symptoms. In contrast, triadic time was not only not protective for boys’ depressive symptoms, but put boys at increased risk for internalizing problems one year later. Coparenting processes may not be effective in protecting against all types of adjustment problems during adolescence. This may be particularly true for families of boys who are establishing independence from the family and may feel less inclined to spend time with their parents; it is possible that coparents’ attempts to spend time together with their sons were viewed not as supportive, but rather intrusive, and that they exacerbated sons’ internalizing symptoms.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

Although some of the conclusions drawn here are speculative and require further empirical attention, this work makes several key contributions to the coparenting literature. This study is among the first to empirically evaluate longitudinal links between coparenting practices and youth adjustment across adolescence. Overall, our findings suggest that how coparenting is conceptualized and measured during offspring’s adolescence may differ in important ways from coparenting in families with young children, and that, like other family systems processes, coparenting dynamics are not solely parent-driven. Adding to mixed findings on the role of youth gender in coparenting, this study also revealed that some linkages between coparenting and adjustment were significant in different ways and at earlier points in adolescence for girls than for boys, perhaps due to gender differences in the timing of pubertal development and/or parents’ differential expectations and concerns about their sons and daughters.

In the face of its contributions, there were also several limitations to this study. First, our design was correlational, and although we were able to illuminate directions of effect, inferences about causality cannot be drawn. Interventions that promote coparenting practices using experimental designs for their evaluation constitute an important research direction. Second, our sample was small for this type of analysis, which may have masked some significant effects, and the sample was comprised of two-parent European American families from a circumscribed geographical location, which limits generalizability. Further research is needed to test the significance of coparenting in other ethnic groups, and families that include stepparents or non-marital coparenting partners. Further, the age spacing of adolescents was
unequal across time points, and ages 14 and 15 are not reflected in these analyses. Consideration of these middle adolescent years might help to better explain the differential timing of some linkages for boys and girls. With respect to the measures of coparenting, we considered triadic time to indicate coparenting involvement exclusive to the adolescent, however most mother-father-youth triads spent little time together with no one else present. Thus, although this study represents an important step in understanding the bidirectional links between dimensions of coparenting that are relevant to adolescent adjustment, future research is needed to replicate and extend our findings.

In conclusion, findings from this study advance understanding of the mutual influences between a key family systems dynamic, coparenting, and adolescent adjustment. This work makes an important contribution to the coparenting literature, which has largely overlooked the new challenges that parents face during their offspring’s adolescent years. Our findings also illuminate gender differences in the links between coparenting and girls’ versus boys’ adjustment across adolescence. Finally, going beyond the pervasive focus on parent-driven socialization processes in the family, a family systems perspective directed attention to the role of adolescent adjustment for coparenting practices. Taken together, our findings are an important step in documenting the significance of coparenting for adolescent well-being. Indeed, taken together, our findings highlight the importance of studying parenting dynamics and adolescent adjustment from a family systems perspective.
References


### Table 4.1. Means, Standard Deviations and Bivariate Correlations for Dimensions of Coparenting and Adolescent Adjustment.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1.</th>
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<th>14.</th>
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<th>Girls’ Mean (SD)</th>
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<td>.14</td>
<td>.08</td>
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<td>.09</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.17†</td>
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<td>-.12</td>
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<td>.05</td>
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<td>--</td>
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<td>.22**</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
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<td>.13</td>
<td>.33**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.17†</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>16.97 (36.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Risky T3</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.18†</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.85**</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>24.61 (6.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Depressive T3</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.17†</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>8.23 (6.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Shared DM T4</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.79**</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>5.81 (2.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Triadic time T4</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>12.84 (24.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Risky T4</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.59**</td>
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<td>-.07</td>
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<td>.26</td>
<td>-.17†</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>26.52 (7.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Depressive T4</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.18†</td>
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<td>-.02</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>7.76 (6.63)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. T1 – T4 refer to time points of measurement; Correlations for girls above the diagonal, correlations for boys below the diagonal. DM = Decision-making.
† < .10, *p < .05. **p < .01.
Figure 4.1. Cross-Lagged Path Model for Parents’ Shared Decision-Making and Adolescent Risky Behaviors.

Time 1:  
Age 12  
- Shared decision-making  
- Risky behavior

Time 2:  
Age 13  
- Shared decision-making  
- Risky behavior

Time 3:  
Age 16  
- Shared decision-making  
- Risky behavior

Time 4:  
Age 17  
- Shared decision-making  
- Risky behavior

Note. All effects are reported as standardized regression coefficients. Effects for boys are shown first, effects for girls are shown in parentheses.

* $p < .05; \quad \text{**} p < .01; \quad \text{†} p < .10$
Figure 4.2. Cross-Lagged Path Model for Parents' Shared Decision-Making and Adolescent Depressive Symptoms.

Note. All effects are reported as standardized regression coefficients. Effects are for boys and girls.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, † $p < .10$
Figure 4.3. Cross-Lagged Path Model for Triadic Time and Adolescent Risky Behaviors.

Note. All effects are reported as standardized regression coefficients. Effects for boys are shown first, effects for girls are shown in parentheses.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, † $p < .10$
Figure 4.4. Cross-Lagged Path Model for Triadic Time and Adolescent Depressive Symptoms.

Note. All effects are reported as standardized regression coefficients. Effects for boys are shown first, effects for girls are shown in parentheses.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .10$
CONCLUSION

Although a family systems model has considerable conceptual appeal, little empirical research has examined family dynamics beyond dyadic interpersonal relationships. An overarching goal of this dissertation was to shed light on family systems processes by examining coparenting, a triadic family construct that encompasses characteristics of two parents and their child. The research presented here draws upon the main tenets of a family systems perspective – that family dynamics are sensitive to developmental change, connected to the outside world, and mutually influential – in a comprehensive examination of the development and determinants of coparenting across time. In addition, this work expands the scope of coparenting research by (1) examining coparenting during adolescence, a developmental period that presents new challenges to parents, and (2) advancing understanding of normative family processes within two-parent African American families, a group that is largely underrepresented in family research.

The first study provided findings on the within-family correlates of change in coparenting satisfaction over the first and second decades of marriage. Using a sample of married African American mothers and fathers of adolescent-age offspring, multi-level growth curve models revealed that the trajectory of change in coparenting satisfaction across years of marriage was somewhat dependent on age of offspring. Specifically, findings suggested that offspring’s adolescence was linked to greater satisfaction among coparents who were more recently married, whereas coparents who were married for longer periods of time, experienced declines in coparenting satisfaction. This study demonstrated the importance of taking into account, time and timing as experienced by multiple family members to fully understand the developmental trajectory of family systems dynamics. Considering the length of time parents have been working together in their parental roles, independent from age of offspring or duration of marriage, may be important in designing coparenting and parenting programs.

Results from this study were also consistent with predictions that coparenting and marital relationship qualities are closely tied across later stages of youth development; these family processes continue to change together over time as marriage and parenting are challenged in new and different
ways. Testing the notion that shared attitudes are a reflection of parents being on the same page, this study also explored the implications of inter-parental attitude incongruence as a potential risk factor for coparenting satisfaction. Discrepant childrearing attitudes were only problematic for coparenting satisfaction among couples with low levels of marital love, corroborating past work that interpersonal warmth is a key factor for relationship satisfaction.

Broadening the study of correlates of change in coparenting satisfaction, the second study examined socio-cultural stressors and supports as predictors of change in African American parents’ coparenting satisfaction across offspring’s adolescence. Growth curve models revealed that mothers’ coparenting satisfaction remained stable across offspring’s adolescence whereas fathers were more satisfied than mothers when youth were about 8 years old, but became significantly dissatisfied across offspring’s adolescence, lending support to the prediction that adolescence was a stressor that challenged fathers’ coparenting. Consistent with predictions, religiosity promoted greater coparenting satisfaction for mothers and fathers. In contrast, economic strain was a stressor on coparenting satisfaction for both parents, and racial discrimination was related to less satisfaction for fathers. Consistent with predictions, education predicted less satisfaction for both parents, and income was related to greater satisfaction among fathers, but negatively related to coparenting satisfaction for mothers; here, follow-up analyses suggested that women who earned more relative to their husbands had lower coparenting satisfaction compared to women who earned less than their husbands, and to their husbands, perhaps because they assumed primary responsibility for work and family domains.

Taken together with those of study one, the findings from this study underscore that the index of time makes a difference in our interpretation regarding the nature of change in coparenting satisfaction. This study also represents an important first step in documenting the role of sociocultural factors for mothers’ versus fathers’ satisfaction with coparenting. More specifically, findings related to income demonstrated the importance of going beyond between-group comparisons to consider within-family dynamics set up by the differential experiences of wives and husbands.
The third study addressed changes in parental shared decision making and shared time with adolescent offspring and examined bidirectional links between these dimensions of coparenting and adolescent sons’ and daughters’ adjustment problems. Parents of sons shared more decisions than parents of daughters, and although all mother-father-youth triads spent relatively little time together, “triadic time” was nonetheless related to adolescent well-being. Consistent with predictions that coparenting would predict more positive adolescent adjustment and that adjustment problems would predict poorer coparenting practices, there were significant effects in both directions. Also as predicted, some pathways were significant at earlier points in adolescence for girls than for boys, perhaps due to the timing of pubertal development in girls and boys and parents’ differential expectations and concerns about their sons and daughters. The findings from this work make important contribution to the coparenting literature in demonstrating that how we think about coparenting during offspring’s adolescence differs in some ways from coparenting in families with young children, and in demonstrating that, like other family systems processes, coparenting dynamics are not solely parent-driven.

Taken together, the results of these three studies direct attention to several issues that advance knowledge of families as dynamic social systems. First, reflecting the contributions of this work to notion that developmental changes pervade family functioning, our findings highlight that developmental transitions do not occur in a vacuum, but influence - and are influenced by - individual family members and factors in the broader sociocultural context. It also appears that offspring’s adolescence imposes challenges on parents’ abilities to work together as a team and suggest that family programs focused on adolescent-age offspring place emphasis on the unique coparenting challenges of this period. The findings also demonstrate that the interpretation of family change depends on how time is conceptualized. Going beyond phase of study as the index of time for longitudinal change promotes understanding of change that accompanies individual and family level developmental processes. Using indices of time that reflect developmental changes is an important direction for future longitudinal work.

This work also advances understanding of the mutual influences that unfold within families of adolescent offspring, and the interrelations between family dynamics and sociocultural stressors and
supports that are present within and beyond the family context. In this way, findings from these studies
highlight the consideration of individual experiences relative to those of other family members, in
addition to differences between families. In sum, this dissertation research took important first steps in
understanding the development of one family systems dynamic, coparenting, across multiple indices of
couples’ and offspring’s development, and in demonstrating the relevance of coparenting for youth
adjustment across adolescence.
VITAE

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Education

Ph.D. Human Development & Family Studies, December, 2011
The Pennsylvania State University
Dissertation: Coparenting During Adolescence from an Ecological and Family Systems Perspective
Advisor: Dr. Susan M. McHale

M.S. Human Development & Family Studies, December 2007
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Thesis: Mothers’ and Fathers’ Experiences of Discrimination and Family Relationship Quality: The Moderating Role of Gender
Advisor: Dr. Susan M. McHale

B.A. Brain & Cognitive Sciences; Psychology, May 2004
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Selected Publications


Riina, E.M., & Feinberg, M.E. (Manuscript under revision). The role of gender in links between childrearing involvement and parents’ adjustment. Family Relations


Selected Presentations


