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The Trajectory of Coparenting Satisfaction in African American Families: The Impact of Sociocultural Stressors and Supports

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Abstract

Based in family systems and ecological perspectives, this study expands the scope of coparenting research by: (a) charting the trajectory of coparenting satisfaction for mothers and fathers in two-parent African American families during their offspring's adolescence, and (b) examining the role of sociocultural stressors and supports for coparenting satisfaction. Participants were 192 African American mothers and fathers who reported on their coparenting satisfaction and both economic and cultural stressors (economic strain and racial discrimination), and supports (socioeconomic resources and religiosity). Longitudinal growth curves revealed declines in coparenting satisfaction for fathers but not mothers over the course of offspring's adolescence. Findings were generally consistent with hypotheses that stressors were negatively, and supports, positively, related to average levels of 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 family and broader sociocultural contexts.

Keywords

coparenting satisfaction; sociocultural stressors; sociocultural supports; adolescent development; African American family processes

Coparenting, or the relationship between caregivers pertaining to parenting issues (Feinberg, 2003; Van Egeren, 2004), is a multidimensional family systems construct. Coparenting is reflected by feelings about shared parenting, such as satisfaction with the coparenting relationship, and by coparenting behaviors, like provision of support and shared parenting practices (Van Egeren, 2004). Because existing research focuses on coparenting behaviors, coparenting satisfaction is not well understood, even though parents' perceptions may be critical to understanding the interpersonal context in which their shared parenting takes place (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000).

Consistent with a family systems perspective, children are an inherent component of coparenting relationships, and coparenting is sensitive to their development. During the transition to parenthood, when parents learn to work together in their parenting roles, changes in coparenting experiences coincide with changes in infants' development (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 child rearing. However, relatively little is known about changes in coparenting satisfaction that may accompany this often challenging phase of development.

We also know very little about coparenting by African American couples. Existing research on coparenting in African American families has focused almost exclusively on single mothers and a nonmarital coparent (e.g., Dorsey, Forehand, & Brody, 2007), and it is likely that coparenting among married couples differs in important ways from nonmarital or intergenerational coparenting given close ties between coparenting and marital relationships (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). Despite the fact that many African American youths are raised by single mothers, many grow up in two-parent households and research documents differences between African American families and other racial or ethnic groups in family dynamics, including marital processes and parenting (Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Steinberg, 1996). Further, research on coparenting from fathers' perspectives, especially in African American families, is sparse (Insabella, Williams, & Pruett, 2003). Extending coparenting research in several ways, our first goal was to investigate the trajectory of African American mothers' and fathers' coparenting satisfaction during offspring's adolescence.

From an ecological perspective, family dynamics are rooted in a sociocultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), and researchers have identified economic and cultural stressors that impact family processes in African American families (Conger et al., 2002). At the same time, socioeconomic resources as well as cultural values can support the development of positive family dynamics, even in the face of the challenges that African American families face (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996). To expand the scope of coparenting research to include the sociocultural contexts of African American families, our second goal was to examine the implications of sociocultural stressors and supports for coparenting satisfaction, on average and over time. We investigated sociocultural factors that have proven important in past research on African Americans, specifically economic strain and racial discrimination as stressors, and as indices of support, income, and education (i.e., socioeconomic resources) and religiosity.

Coparenting Satisfaction During Adolescence

Adolescence is a developmental period that is characterized by increasing independence and autonomy from parents (Steinberg, 2001), which may place new demands on the family system and, in European American families, is associated with increased conflict and decreased warmth (Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007). Although research focusing on coparenting in families of adolescents is limited, there is some evidence that coparenting processes depend on offspring's age (Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993; Margolin et al., 2001). In one study, compared to coparents of preschoolers, 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, such as their ability to take sides (Margolin et al., 2001). Coparents of preschoolers have also reported more cooperation than parents of adolescents, possibly because younger children require more frequent coordination than 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 has been mixed. Family gender dynamics intensify in adolescence (Hill & Lynch, 1983), and, accordingly, we might expect that youth gender will become a factor in coparenting satisfaction during this period. Parent gender may also play a role because mothers and fathers respond differently to offspring's development, which could disrupt their established coparenting relationship.

Extending current research on coparenting to families of older children, we examined longitudinal changes in mothers' and fathers' coparenting satisfaction across offspring's adolescence. In line with a family systems perspective that adolescence brings changes to family dynamics, we expected that parents would need to renegotiate aspects of coparenting to accommodate changes in youth, a process that might be a source of disruption in coparenting and lead to declines in satisfaction. To the extent that adolescent development poses a challenge to coparenting, we also included youth's pubertal development in addition to their ages as potential correlates. 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 on coparenting in African American families has focused on support and conflict between single mothers and nonmarital coparents (generally grandparents). Findings have indicated that coparenting characterized by high support and low conflict are related to well-being for mothers (Dorsey et al., 2007), youth (Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, Foster, & Brody, 2005), and families (Jones, Shaffer, Forehand, Brody, & Armistead, 2003; Brody & Flor, 1996). Given strong ties between coparenting and marital qualities (Margolin et al., 2001), we might expect that coparenting experiences among married couples are more susceptible to changes in family systems dynamics. However, there is little empirical attention to coparenting experiences of married African American mother–father dyads.

Identifying factors that are related to coparenting satisfaction among African American married couples is an important area for further research for several reasons. First, drawing on what we know about racial and ethnic differences in marriage and parenting, African American men and women tend to be less satisfied in their couple relationships (Broman, 1993), and they also tend to have more authoritarian parenting practices (Lamborn et al., 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, especially during adolescence (Smetana & Chuang, 2001); as such, parents may not always be on the same page with respect to child rearing, which may be reflected in low coparenting satisfaction. 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), and in early childhood, mothers' and fathers' evaluations of coparenting follow different trajectories (Van Egeren, 2004). 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 and ethnic groups, African American fathers in two parent families are more involved in child rearing, and African American mothers have higher rates of involvement in the workforce and, consequently, may be less involved at home (Hossain & Roopnarine, 1993; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000).

The Sociocultural Contexts of Coparenting: Stressors and Supports

An ecological approach highlights the sociocultural contexts in which families develop. Compared to other racial and ethnic groups, African American families are at increased risk to experience stressful experiences, such as economic hardship and racial discrimination, in their day-to-day lives (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009). At the same time, socioeconomic resources and cultural supports are protective for African American families (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996). From an emotional spillover

perspective, experiences of stressors trigger negative emotional responses, which may be transferred to interpersonal relationships (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). Indeed, economic strain (Cutrona et al., 2003; Gutman, McLoyd, & Tokoyawa, 2005) and discrimination (Feagin & McKinney, 2005; Murry et al., 2008) disrupt other family dynamics, including parenting and marital quality among African American families. When one or both parents are exposed to these stressors, coparenting satisfaction may suffer as well.

On the other hand, there is evidence that supports such as socioeconomic resources and religiosity serve as protective factors for African American families. The family adjustment and adaptation response model portrays how 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 this perspective, one study found that parenting and family functioning were more positive in African American households in which parents had higher incomes, education levels, and fewer dependent members (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, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996). Although research on the role of religiosity for African American families has been more limited than research on the family implications of other cultural values, several studies (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994; Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996) have identified positive links between parents' religiosity and other features of family support and cohesion, and negative associations between religious practices and interparental 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 nonresident fathers (Arditti & Kelly, 1994; Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2009). In research on coparenting evaluations of nonresident fathers, Arditti and Kelly (1994) found that education was positively related to coparenting evaluations, and, among primarily African American nonresident fathers, higher income and education were related to more perceived coparenting support (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2009). Such findings are consistent with results from research on White married couples (Stright & Bales, 2003). Our study takes the important step of examining whether these and other sociocultural stressors and supports contribute to coparenting satisfaction during off-spring's adolescence, a developmental period that may pose challenges to coparents. We examined whether stressors and supports are related to mothers' and fathers' coparenting satisfaction on average and to changes in coparenting satisfaction across off-spring's adolescence. Extending a family stress framework to coparenting, we expected that economic strain and racial discrimination would 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 parents.

The Present Study

This study addressed two goals. The first was to chart changes in coparenting satisfaction among two-parent African American families during youth's adolescent development. From a family systems perspective, which holds that challenges associated with adolescence may interfere with aspects of family functioning, we expected coparenting satisfaction to decline from pre- to middle adolescence. To further understand the implications of offspring's development for coparenting satisfaction, we tested the role of youth's pubertal status, with

the expectation that coparenting satisfaction would be lowest at about the midpoint of pubertal development as parents renegotiated their coparenting roles. To understand changes in coparenting satisfaction independent of marital processes, these associations were examined controlling for marital love. 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 adolescent gender for coparenting satisfaction, these analyses were exploratory. In line with findings that fathers have expressed more satisfaction with coparenting than mothers (Van Egeren, 2004), however, we expected differences favoring fathers' coparenting satisfaction.

Placing the study of coparenting in context, our second goal was to examine sociocultural factors that may have implications for coparenting satisfaction. Based on research that has showed that stressors interfere with positive family functioning, and on theoretical and empirical work that has documented that family assets promote positive family adjustment, we expected that: (a) perceptions of economic strain and/or racial discrimination would be associated with declines in and lower average levels of coparenting satisfaction, and (b) supports in the form of socioeconomic resources (i.e., higher income and education), and religiosity would be related to increases in coparenting satisfaction over time, and higher satisfaction on average.

Method

Participants

Subject data came from mothers and fathers in 192 families who participated in a 3-year longitudinal study of relationships in two-parent African American families. Given the larger goals of the study, we targeted families who self-identified as Black or African American, and we 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, churches, and 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 10 families in which parents were not in a couple relationship (e.g., mother and grandfather). Of the 192 participating families, 15 couples (8%) were cohabiting and 24 (13%) divorced over the course of the study. At Time 1, mean ages of mothers and fathers were 40.71 years ($SD = 5.62$) and 43.41 ($SD = 7.21$), respectively. On average, mothers' education was 14.66 years ($SD = 1.78$) and fathers' education, 14.25 ($SD = 2.37$), with a score of 12 referring to a high school degree and a score of 16 corresponding to a college degree. Families were generally working and middle class, and most parents were employed (86% of mothers and 94% of fathers). Fathers worked an average of 43.90 hours per week ($SD = 17.86$), and mothers, 32.61 ($SD = 17.96$). The mean household income was \$89,239 ($SD = \$56,411$).

The majority (80%) of families included two or three children ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.17$). Target youth were 10.38 years old ($SD = 1.09$), on average, at Time 1, and the sample was approximately equally divided by youth's gender ($n = 88$ girls). Most youth were biologically related to mothers (97%) and fathers (80%). To ensure that relatedness was not a factor in parents' coparenting satisfaction, dummy variables for biological (0) versus nonbiological (1) relationships to each parent were tested as controls. Neither mothers', $\gamma = .$

01, $SE = .56$, $t = .02$, ns , nor fathers' relatedness, $\gamma = -.28$, $SE = .23$, $t = -1.20$, ns , were related to coparenting, so these controls were not included in the analyses. Average marital duration across the study period was 14.16 years ($SD = 6.79$), and cohabiting couples averaged 7.53 years ($SD = 6.15$) together. Of note, relative to married mothers and fathers, cohabiting parents had lower income, $t = 6.38$, $p < .01$, education, $t = 10.54$, $p < .01$, and religiosity, $t = 2.49$, $p < .01$, on average. Divorced parents had lower average coparenting satisfaction compared to couples who remained together, $t = 3.06$, $p < .01$, but there were no other differences on the basis of marital status.

Sample attrition was minimal. Nine families withdrew over the 3-year study period, but they did not differ from other families on demographic characteristics at Time 1; given that our analytic approach, multilevel modeling (MLM), deals well with data missing at random, these cases were included.

Procedures

Mothers and fathers were interviewed annually in their homes, for 3 years, by teams of two interviewers, almost all of whom were African American. They reported on relationship experiences, individual characteristics and attitudes, personal experiences, and individual well-being during the past year, unless otherwise noted. Interviews lasted 2–3 hr. After completion of the interviews, families received a \$200 honorarium.

Measures

Coparenting satisfaction—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: (a) “How satisfied are you with your partner's fundamental principles about how to bring up children (e.g., values, discipline, etc.)?”; (b) “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, and so forth?”; and (c) “How satisfied are you with the way parenting decisions in your family get made and the level of influence you have in those decisions?” Although the sample was selected based on a target child, importantly, this measure reflects general coparenting satisfaction and was not asked in reference to a specific child. Alphas for mothers and fathers ranged from .84–.89 across study years.

Pubertal development—Pubertal development at each time point was assessed using five items regarding specific physical changes puberty (Petersen, Crockett, Richards, & Boxer, 1988). Mothers of boys and girls were asked about the onset of a growth spurt, body hair, and skin changes. Mothers of girls were asked about breast development and whether menstruation had begun; mothers with sons reported on facial hair growth and voice changes. Items were summed, with higher scores indicating greater pubertal development. Alphas ranged from .66–.77 for girls, and from .65–.79 for boys.

Economic strain—Economic strain was assessed using 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 ranging from 1 (*more than enough*) to 5 (*not enough to make ends meet*), mothers and fathers reported on how much money they had left over each month, after paying bills. Interitem correlations (r) ranged from .64–.67 for mothers, and from .66–.70 for fathers.

Racial discrimination—Racial discrimination was assessed at each point using the 11-item Experiences with Discrimination Scale (Murry, Brown, Brody, Cutrona, & Simons, 2001). Mothers and fathers used a 4-point rating scale (1 = *never* to 4 = *several times*) to report on different types of discrimination during the past year. For example, “How often has someone said something derogatory or insulting to you just because you are African American?” Alphas ranged from .87–.92.

Socioeconomic resources—Socioeconomic resources were measured based on parents' education and income. Mothers and fathers each reported on their highest level of education (where 12 = *high school degree*, 14 = *vocational school*, 16 = *college degree*, 18 = *master's degree*, 20 = *PhD/doctorate*). Parents also reported on their own annual income.

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

Marital love—Marital love was assessed at Time 1 using 9 items from the Relationships Questionnaire (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*), mothers and fathers reported on marital relationship love during the past year. For example, “To what extent do you have a sense of 'belonging' with your partner?” Alphas ranged from .89–.95.

Background characteristics—Background characteristics, including offspring age, gender, and family size, were collected at each phase. Marital status was included as a dummy code (1 = divorced).

Results

Analytic Strategy

To examine the trajectory of coparenting satisfaction during youth's adolescence, we used MLM. This approach extends multiple regression to account for dependencies in the data (i.e., correlations within person over time and 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 using study year as the metric of time. 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 Proc Mixed, in SAS, Version 9.2. The Level 1, or within-person model, captured changes in coparenting satisfaction in relation to time-varying covariates. To describe 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, or parents' economic strain, discrimination, and income coincided with changes in coparenting satisfaction, these were included as time-varying covariates at Level 1, and group-mean centered, or centered on 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, such as education level and religiosity. To examine whether 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. These Level 2 predictors allowed us to assess whether average levels of stressors and supports were associated with mean levels of coparenting satisfaction across time. Because Level 2 cross-time means reflect between-individual variation, including these means also limited the time-varying versions of the variables to explaining within-individual variation over time, beyond stable individual differences (Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002; Raudenbush & Byrk, 2002).

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

In these analyses, parent gender was coded 0 = father and 1 = mother, and youth gender was coded 0 = girl and 1 = boy. Follow-up analyses for significant interactions were conducted by analyzing models separately by gender, following the guidelines of Aiken and West (1991). In reporting the results, we focused on significant effects at $p < .05$, however, we consider trend-level effects ($p < .10$) when they were consistent with hypotheses or results from prior research. We begin by describing the results of preliminary analyses. We first examine correlations between study variables and stability coefficients for coparenting satisfaction. Then we describe longitudinal changes in coparenting satisfaction, and differences in change as a function of parent and youth gender and youth puberty development. Finally, we examine the links between sociocultural stressors and supports and mothers' and fathers' coparenting satisfaction.

Preliminary Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and stability coefficients for all time-varying variables are shown in Table 1. Of note, coparenting satisfaction was high, well above the midpoint of this 9-point scale, and relatively stable across time. We next examined correlations between the predictor variables to understand whether stressors could be combined into one model and supports examined in a separate model. Correlations, means, and standard deviations for cross-time averages of predictor variables are presented in Table 2. In general, correlations were small-to-modest in size, allowing us to combine stressors into one model and supports into another.

Trajectory of Coparenting Satisfaction and the Roles of Gender and Youth Puberty

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 years, the mean age across youth across all study time points. Parent gender, marital status, marital love, and family size were included as Level 2 covariates in all models to understand changes in coparenting satisfaction, controlling for these characteristics. Information about the variability in coparenting satisfaction accounted for by between- versus within-family factors are shown in Table 3 (random effects). Based on Akaike information criterion and Bayesian information criterion fit statistics and the

significance of variance components, a model with a random intercept and fixed linear term was chosen as the best model to describe change in coparenting satisfaction. In this baseline model, there was a marginal linear decline in coparenting satisfaction as a function of the time-varying indicator of youth age, $\gamma = -.07$, $SE = .04$, $p = .07$. We next tested parent gender as a moderator of the link between age and coparenting satisfaction. A marginal interaction emerged, $\gamma = .12$, $SE = .06$, $p = .08$; follow-ups showed that decline in coparenting satisfaction was significant for fathers, $\gamma = -.11$, $SE = .05$, $p = .01$, but not mothers, $\gamma = -.01$, $SE = .05$, $p = .83$ (see Figure 1). To ensure that change in coparenting satisfaction was related to change in the target child's age, we examined the trajectory of coparenting as a function of other child's age. There was no linear, $\gamma = -.02$, $SE = .03$, $p = .36$, or quadratic, $\gamma = .00$, $SE = .01$, $p = .92$, effect of change related to age of the other child (whose mean age across study years was 15.20 years, $SD = 2.25$) suggesting that the target child's adolescent development had unique implications for coparenting satisfaction.

To understand the role of youth characteristics for changes in coparenting satisfaction, our next model included youth gender, as well as the time-varying effect of youth puberty development as predictors of coparenting satisfaction. There was no main effect of youth gender, and gender did not moderate the link between youth age and coparenting satisfaction. The time-varying effect of puberty was also nonsignificant, meaning that, beyond youth age, puberty did not account for change in coparenting satisfaction. The interaction between youth gender and parent gender was also nonsignificant. Retaining nonsignificant interactions contributes to an increase in standard errors (Aiken & West, 1991), so these effects were removed from the model.

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

Our next step was to test whether the stressors, economic strain and racial discrimination (see Table 3, Model A) and the supports of socioeconomic resources and religiosity (see Table 3, Model B) were related to changes in coparenting satisfaction, and whether these links differed for mothers versus fathers. Of note, we found no evidence that changes in stressors and supports corresponded to changes in coparenting satisfaction over time; rather, all effects reported below are at Level 2, for cross-time averages. Nonsignificant interactions were trimmed from models and are not shown in Table 3. The full model, including main effects and significant interactions by parent, is shown in Table 3, Model C.

Cross-Time Stressors and Supports and Average Coparenting Satisfaction

Sociocultural stressors and coparenting satisfaction—The indicator of *economic strain* was negatively related to coparenting satisfaction, and this association did not differ for mothers and fathers. Consistent with expectations about *discrimination* as a stressor, racial discrimination was negatively related to the coparenting satisfaction, and this effect was qualified by parent. Follow-ups showed that discrimination was negatively related to fathers', $\gamma = -.47$, $SE = .15$, $p < .01$, but not mothers', $\gamma = -.01$, $SE = .21$, $p = .98$, coparenting satisfaction (see Figure 2).

Sociocultural supports and coparenting satisfaction—With respect to the role of supports for coparenting satisfaction, inconsistent with our expectations, at Level 2 (cross-time average) there was a negative effect of *education* on coparenting satisfaction. The effect of *income* on the mean of coparenting satisfaction also was positive; this effect was qualified by parent gender. For fathers, there was a marginal positive association between income and coparenting satisfaction, $\gamma = .02$, $SE = .00$, $p = .09$, but average income was not significantly associated with coparenting satisfaction for mothers, $\gamma = -.00$, $SE = .00$, $p = .20$ (Figure 3). Religiosity was not significantly related to coparenting satisfaction, and there were no interactions by gender.

As a final step, we included all significant Level 2 effects and interaction terms in the same model to understand the relative significance of these stressors and supports for mothers' and fathers' coparenting satisfaction. As shown in Table 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

A growing body of research has showed that coparenting is a fundamental family systems dynamic that is affected by developmental transitions within the family and by the contexts in which families are embedded. The findings from this study are consistent with past work and extend what is known about coparenting to married African American families with adolescent offspring. In line with the idea that adolescence is a challenging time for parents, and that fathers may be more susceptible to changes within the family, fathers' coparenting satisfaction declined across youth's early adolescent years. Findings from this study also confirmed our hypothesis that cross-time means of sociocultural stressors and supports are associated with coparenting satisfaction, with somewhat different implications for mothers and fathers. Stressors and supports were relatively stable across time, which may have obscured time-varying associations between these factors and coparenting satisfaction. Further, we found these effects independent of marital love, adding to existing evidence that coparenting and marital processes are unique. Below, we review the findings in greater detail, directing attention to the ways in which this study advances understanding of coparenting satisfaction among two-parent African American families with adolescents, and the sociocultural contexts of their family dynamics.

In line with Van Egeren's (2004) study, and with the notion that mothers' family roles may be more scripted—and thus less susceptible to developmental changes—than those of fathers, fathers' coparenting satisfaction declined whereas mothers' coparenting satisfaction was relatively stable across youth's adolescence. Also somewhat consistent with past findings that fathers rate coparenting relationships more positively than mothers (Floyd & Zmich, 1991), fathers reported higher satisfaction when youth were entering adolescence; by the time youth were approximately fifteen years old, however, fathers and mothers did not significantly differ from each other, suggesting that fathers' satisfaction was particularly vulnerable to the challenges of raising an adolescent. We found no evidence that youth characteristics—pubertal development or gender—played a role in coparenting satisfaction. Because age and puberty were highly related ($r = .47$), the age effects likely obscured puberty effects. Puberty is confounded with a range of changes—social, cognitive, emotional—and thus age may be a more powerful marker of the challenges that accompany adolescence. Past research has offered mixed evidence for the role of offspring gender in coparenting (Margolin et al., 2001; Stright & Bales, 2003). In our sample, youth gender was not a significant factor, but further research is needed to understand when and for whom gender plays a role in coparenting evaluations.

In general, our hypotheses about cross-time indicators of economic strain and racial discrimination as stressors for coparenting were supported. Perception of economic strain was related to lower levels of coparenting satisfaction for both parents, even after accounting for income and education. Discrimination was significant for fathers', but not mothers' coparenting satisfaction. Consistent with past research (e.g., Stevenson, Cameron, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis, 2002), fathers experienced discrimination more frequently than mothers, which may mean that they were more prone to negative spill-over from this type of stressor. This topic warrants further research with different samples, given that discrimination is a significant stressor for individual and family well-being, particularly

among African American men (Riina & McHale, 2010). In contrast to expectations that changes in stressors would be related to declines over time in coparenting satisfaction, there were no significant time-varying associations. Low variability over time in economic strain and discrimination may have prevented us from detecting significant patterns of change.

Findings related to the role of socioeconomic resources for mothers' and fathers' average levels of coparenting satisfaction were somewhat inconsistent 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 nonresident fathers (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2009), our findings suggest that education level is 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 has revealed that highly educated parents have the highest levels of negative spillover from work to family life (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002). Drawing on these findings, it may be that parents who are more educated experienced stressors in work domains that interfere with family life, and in turn, disrupt 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 coparenting satisfaction. As yet, 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 role of stressors related to work and education for coparenting.

It was also surprising to discover that income was a support for average levels of coparenting satisfaction, for fathers but not mothers. This finding could be due to the scripted nature of mothers' versus fathers' family roles; our findings demonstrate that fathers' coparenting satisfaction was sensitive to experiences of stressors (i.e., youth's adolescence and discrimination) as well as to income—a resource. In contrast, we did not find any effect of a sociocultural stressor or support that was significant only for mothers. Also inconsistent with our expectations, religiosity was not related to coparenting satisfaction for mothers or fathers. Even though past work has identified religiosity as a resource for African American families, it may be that socioeconomic resources are more salient for coparenting satisfaction, whereas cultural resources like religiosity affect coparenting behaviors (e.g., Brody et al., 1994). Additional work that explores the roles of cultural resources for family functioning is warranted.

This study filled important gaps in the literature on coparenting and on family systems dynamics in African American families by examining changes in coparenting satisfaction in adolescence and by examining coparenting 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 are tied to youth development. Another strength of this study is its focus on coparenting satisfaction in African American two-parent families. The literature on coparenting in African American families has paid little attention to mothers and fathers—who differ in important ways from nonmarital coparenting figures such as a parent and a grandparent. We also found that average levels of stressors and supports had unique implications for coparenting, beyond marital quality. Further, by using an MLM framework, we were able both to examine differences in coparenting satisfaction between families and to test mother–father differences in the same families in patterns of associations.

Findings from this study have several implications for future empirical and applied work. First, more research is needed to replicate our findings with a larger sample of two-parent African American families, and to clarify the processes involved in the links between stressors and supports and coparenting evaluations. In line with past work (e.g., Brody et al., 1994), for example, it is likely that mental health and well-being play a role in parents' exposure to stressors and supports and relationship satisfaction. Second, our findings suggest that practitioners need to attend to sociocultural factors that are salient for racial and ethnic groups. For example, family relationships of African American men appear to be particularly susceptible to stresses of discrimination. In light of growing evidence that mothers of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds are less satisfied with coparenting than fathers, future research may also identify ways to promote their coparenting satisfaction.

Study Limitations

In the face of its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, our measure of coparenting consisted of only three items. Like prior research on coparenting (e.g., Margolin et al., 2001), we relied on parents' reports of coparenting satisfaction and experiences in general, not in reference to a target child. This may be one explanation why youth characteristics were not strong factors in coparenting satisfaction. In addition, families in this sample had at least one other child, meaning that their adaptation to target youths' adolescence may not be completely novel. Although our finding of nonsignificant change in coparenting as a function of other-child age further supports our contention that changes in coparenting may depend on offspring's adolescent development, more research is needed. Further, our measures of stressors and supports were largely demographic; future research should consider a wider range of sociocultural factors. Although having a sample of two-parent African American families is rare, families in this study came from a circumscribed geographical location and were relatively socioeconomically advantaged, so this work should be replicated in a more representative sample.

Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to the literature in that it shows coparenting changes for fathers when they face new challenges that accompany adolescent development. 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 and 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.

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Figure 1. Interaction between youth age and parent gender for coparenting satisfaction (at Level 1). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. † $p < .10$.

Figure 2. Interaction between racial discrimination (at Level 2) and parent gender for cross-time mean of coparenting satisfaction. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. † $p < .10$.

Figure 3. Interaction between income (at Level 2) and parent gender for cross-time mean of coparenting satisfaction. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. † $p < .10$.

Table 1

Stability Coefficients and Means (and SDs) for Coparenting Satisfaction and Time-Varying Covariates for Mothers (Above Diagonal), Father (Below Diagonal), and Correlations Between Parents' Reports of Coparenting Satisfaction (on Diagonal)

Variable	Time	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Mother <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Father <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
		Age: 10.38	Age: 11.43	Age: 12.55		
Coparenting satisfaction	1	.38**	.48**	.49**	7.07 (1.69)	7.43 (1.59)
	2	.70**	.32**	.58**	7.23 (1.66)	7.38 (1.57)
	3	.54**	.37**	.42**	7.16 (1.83)	7.33 (1.58)
Economic strain	1	.45**	.64**	.46**	5.61 (2.10)	5.45 (2.15)
	2	.59**	.47**	.60**	5.69 (2.16)	5.31 (2.13)
	3	.43**	.61**	.59**	5.53 (2.20)	5.35 (1.96)
Racial discrimination	1	.12*	.57**	.62**	1.76 (0.58)	1.92 (0.65)
	2	.60**	.07	.58**	1.62 (0.48)	1.79 (0.61)
	3	.52**	.63**	.22**	1.57 (0.53)	1.73 (0.63)
Education	1	.48**	.98**	.94**	14.66 (1.78)	14.25 (2.38)
	2	.98**	.47**	.96**	14.67 (1.78)	14.28 (2.32)
	3	.98**	.99**	.43**	14.78 (1.80)	14.29 (2.31)
Income	1	.22**	.89**	.85**	34,342 (23,892)	54,054 (45,487)
	2	.93**	.24**	.89**	33,663 (24,110)	54,175 (44,335)
	3	.92**	.93**	.27**	38,972 (26,231)	60,160 (54,302)

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Means (and SDs) and Correlations for Cross-Time Averages of Stressor and Support Variables for Mothers (Above Diagonal), Fathers (Below Diagonal), and Correlations Between Mothers' and Fathers' Reports (on Diagonal)

	1	2	3	4	5	Mother <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
1. Economic strain	.49**	.10**	-.09**	-.22**	.05	5.62 (2.17)
2. Racial discrimination	.15**	.16**	.03	-.03	.09**	1.65 (0.54)
3. Education	-.10**	.09*	.46**	.39**	.10**	14.73 (1.81)
4. Income	-.16**	-.01	.56**	.18**	.04	\$35,556 (24,830)
5. Religiosity	.12**	.16**	-.00	-.07*	.19**	3.65 (0.51)
Father <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	5.41 (2.08)	1.82 (0.64)	14.29 (2.37)	\$55,996 (48,140)	3.59 (0.60)	

Note. Values reflect cross-time averages pooled across mothers and fathers.

*
 $p < .05$.

**
 $p < .01$.

Table 3

Coefficients From Multilevel Models Predicting Coparenting Satisfaction as a Function of Level 1 Child Age and Level 2 Sociocultural Stressors and Supports

Fixed effect	Model A: Stressors		Model B: Supports		Full model	
	γ	(SE)	γ	SE	γ	SE
Intercept	7.34 **	.12	7.31 **	.42	7.13 **	.41
Level 1						
Youth age	-.11 *	.05	-.11 *	.05	-.09 *	.04
Level 2						
Parent gender ^a	-.24 *	.12	-.19	.13	-.23 †	.13
Youth Age × Parent Gender	.10 †	.06	.09	.06	.08	.06
Marital status	.09	.27	.11	.27	.09	.27
Family size	.01	.06	-.04	.06	-.01	.07
Marital love	.07 **	.01	.07 **	.01	.07 **	.01
Discrimination	-.44 **	.15			-.43 **	.15
Economic strain	-.14 **	.04			-.15 **	.04
Education			-.09 **	.03	-.09 **	.03
Income			.002 †	.001	.001	.001
Religiosity			.00	.11	.06	.11
Discrimination × Parent Gender	.50 *	.22			.48 *	.22
Income × Parent Gender			-.004 *	.001	-.003 *	.001
Level 3						
Youth gender ^b	.15	.15	.13	.15	.10	.15
Random effect						
Level 1	1.27 **		1.25 **		1.28 **	
Level 2	.47 **		.52 **		.40 **	
Level 3	.85 **		.83 **		.88 **	

^aFathers are the reference group.

^bYouth gender is coded 0 = girl and 1 = boy.

† $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.