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Cohabitation Duration and Transient Domesticity

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Abstract

Research finds that many impoverished urban Black adults engage in a pattern of partnering and family formation involving a succession of short cohabitations yielding children, a paradigm referred to as transient domesticity. Researchers have identified socioeconomic status, cultural adaptations, and urbanicity as explanations for aspects of this pattern. We used longitudinal data from the 2001 Survey of Income and Program Participation to analyze variation in cohabitation and marriage duration by race/ethnicity, income, and urban residence. Proportional hazards regression indicated that separation risk is greater among couples that are cohabiting, below 200% of the federal poverty line, and Black but is not greater among urban dwellers. This provides empirical demographic evidence to support the emerging theory of transient domesticity and suggests that both socioeconomic status and race explain this pattern. We discuss the implications of these findings for understanding transient domesticity and make recommendations for using the Survey of Income and Program Participation to further study this family formation paradigm.

Keywords

Black families; cohabitation; relationships; socioeconomic status

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have found that family formation patterns among impoverished and Black populations differ from those of nonpoor and White populations (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Luker, 1997; Manning & Smock, 2000). Dominant U.S. family norms have traditionally advocated long-term marriage, discouraged cohabitation, and discouraged having children outside of marriage (Edgell & Docka, 2007; Gring-Pemble, 2003; Smith, 1993). However, among poor urban Black populations, marriage has become increasingly less common. Many impoverished Black adults engage in a series of short cohabitations, not formal marriages, and have children outside of marriage with different partners (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; Dixon, 2009; Kamp Dush, 2011; Lichter & Qian, 2008; Manning & Smock, 2000; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

In accordance with prior work in this area, we refer to this family (or partnering) paradigm as *transient domesticity* (Dunlap, Golub, & Benoit, 2010; Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2003; Golub, Strickler, & Dunlap, 2012). The concept of transient domesticity grows out of ethnographic research about poor urban African American families and households in which members used drugs. Dunlap and colleagues (2009, p. 20) described the characteristics of such households:

These severely distressed inner-city households were typically unstable. Women generally held the leases due to their eligibility for housing subsidies. Their male partners generally depended on them for their living arrangements. Female–male partnerships typically dissolved after a few months or years ... We refer to these routine and frequent changes in household composition as transient domesticity.

Overall, this research identified the characteristics of transient domesticity to include women householders (person in whose name a housing unit is owned or rented), a series of men partners who move into and then out of the household, nonmarital relationships, and multiple partner fertility. A central component of transient domesticity was short relationship duration. Research into this phenomenon thus far is based on ethnographic research and case studies. Although most poor Black families do not include drug users, the body of research on transient domesticity combined with research on population variations in family formation patterns (reviewed below) led to our interest in testing this theory among the general impoverished Black population.

In this study we examined demographic evidence to test and strengthen this emerging theory by looking at a nationally representative sample of households to understand whether and why short-duration relationships exist among the impoverished Black population. Prior research using panel data has suggested that this general pattern can be attributed to race/ethnic differences, income differences, some combination of both, or related mediating factors (Guzzo & Furstenberg, 2007; Phillips & Sweeney, 2006; Raley & Bumpass, 2003; Rinelli & Brown, 2010; Teachman, 2002). We use longitudinal data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and hazards modeling to examine variation in relationship duration and the factors related to a higher risk of dissolution. Below we describe demographic patterns in partnership type and duration and outline prevailing theoretical explanations for the family formation patterns evident in the poor Black population.

Population Variations in Relationship Characteristics

A recent analysis using cross-sectional data from the 2001 SIPP conducted by Golub, Strickler, and Dunlap (forthcoming<) explored the transient domesticity paradigm by analyzing variation in partnership and parenting status. Substantial variation was found to be associated with both income and race/ethnicity. To examine the magnitude of these effects, we compare poor Blacks with wealthier Whites who differ on both of these dimensions simultaneously. The goal is to examine whether poor and Black populations experience relationships in a different way, compared with nonpoor and White populations, that should be understood as a legitimate family formation pattern and not just as a deviation from norms (also see Seltzer et al., 2005).

Additionally, using a variety of data sources, researchers found that cohabitation among African Americans, as compared with Whites, is much less likely to lead to marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Brown, 2000; Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Manning & Smock, 1995; Rinelli & Brown, 2010). Researchers found that poor Black cohabiting couples are less likely to get married than White cohabiting couples but no more likely to separate. In this manner, cohabitation may serve as an alternative to marriage. Using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, Brown (2000; Rinelli & Brown,

2010) found that Black cohabiting couples were marginally more likely (statistically significant at the .10 but not .05 level) to have separated by the second wave of data collection than White cohabiting couples. However, there was an issue of statistical power because the dataset included only 75 Black cohabiting couples, demonstrating that further research into this topic is clearly needed.

In an analysis of marriage and cohabitation, Bulanda and Brown (2007) found that Blacks compared with Whites had lower marital quality and were more likely to be divorced by the time of the second wave of data collection. Using a proportional hazards model, they estimated Blacks were more likely to divorce, although this effect went away after marital quality was taken into account. Proportional hazards is a conventional procedure for studying the time until the occurrence of an event, such as a divorce, and the factors associated with a greater risk of occurrence (Lawless, 1982). Whether it was a woman's second or higher parity marriage was also associated with a higher likelihood of divorce. Income (measured as a continuous variable) was not associated with variation in divorce.

These prior studies illustrate that poor and Black populations in the United States demonstrate different relationship types and patterns, on average, from nonpoor and White populations. They are more likely to have nonmarital relationships and relationships that are shorter in duration. The present study used proportional hazards modeling to investigate a key component of transient domesticity by examining relationship duration among different demographic groups and the characteristics that explain these differences using SIPP data. Below, we review theoretical explanations for transient domesticity among impoverished Blacks.

Explanations for Transient Domesticity

The research discussed above indicates that impoverished Blacks have qualitatively different romantic relationship and family formation patterns from nonpoor Whites. They are more likely to be unmarried, cohabit with non-marital partners, and have children outside of marriage. Scholars have posited two primary explanations for this pattern: socioeconomic status and cultural adaptations. In this section we discuss both explanations and the empirical evidence to support them and identify the interrelatedness of these explanations and mediating factors.

Poverty

Social science research has documented the norms of partnering and family formation among impoverished urban Black populations (Anderson, 1999; Dunlap, Golub, & Benoit, 2010; Dunlap et al., 2003; Furstenberg, 2007; Jarrett & Burton, 1999). Much of this literature suggests that the partnership patterns associated with transient domesticity among Blacks are primarily the result of poverty (Furstenberg, 2007; Hayden, 1984). These studies find that poor urban Blacks prize the dream of a lifelong partner but this ideal remains beyond their reach (Anderson, 1999; Dunlap, Stürzenhofecker, & Johnson, 2006; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Fritz, 2009; Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004; Schwartz, 2006). Many scholars working from this perspective contend that the association between race and relationship duration is spurious, a consequence of widespread and persistent poverty among Blacks. In particular, a large percentage of poor Black men represent unsuitable prospects for long-term relationships because of their limited earning potential and their involvement with the criminal justice system (Edin, 2000; Goffman, 2009; Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003; Lopoo & Western, 2005; Reid, 2010; Wilson, 1996). Manning and Smock (1995, p. 518) suggested that economics is the primary reason poor Black cohabiting couples tend to break up when faced with a shared pregnancy: "For white cohabiting women, pregnancy serves as a strong impetus to marriage, but this is not the case for black women. ... In

precarious economic conditions, governmental assistance or extended-family members may be more reliable sources of social and/or economic support than a partner.”

Several studies provide further support for this structural explanation by showing that cohabitation is common among poor persons regardless of whether they are Black, Hispanic, or White (Bourgois, 1995; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Waller, 2002). For example, a multivariate analysis by Lichter, Qian, and Mellot (2006) suggested that income is an important factor in relationship patterns and that race/ethnicity alone is not. They examined data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and found that poor, in contrast to nonpoor, cohabiting couples were more likely to experience dissolution within 5 years and much less likely to get married.

Cultural Adaptations

However, some research finds that the effect of race on relationship duration is independent of the effect of income. This research suggests that African Americans have developed distinctive family formation patterns in the face of historical and contemporary hardships (Dodson, 1997; Hill, 2006; Malson, 1983; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004; Stevenson, 1995). From this perspective, prevailing relationship patterns have allowed African Americans to survive in the face of hardships, including deaths during the middle passage, the selling of slaves without regard for families, the mass incarceration of Black men, residential segregation, and persistent discrimination and racism (Anderson, 1999; Billingsley, 1992; Gutman, 1976; Stack, 1974). This history is reflected in the relationship and family formation patterns of African Americans at all income levels.

Correspondingly, some studies have found that the effect of race/ethnicity on relationship duration was much stronger than the effect of poverty. Phillips and Sweeney (2006) used multivariate logistic regression decomposition to analyze data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and estimated that differences in employment status, education, age at marriage, and other factors accounted for only 28% of the difference in marital disruption experienced by White and Black women. These findings suggest an important race/ethnicity difference in the transience of relationships (at least with regard to marriage) net of socioeconomic status. Other studies using the NSFG have yielded similar results (Raley & Bumpass, 2003; Teachman, 2002).

Analyzing data from the Fragile Families Study of low-income families, Osborne, Manning, and Smock (2007) found that separation was much higher among cohabiting couples and among Blacks and suggested that relationship disruption is influenced primarily by race/ethnicity, not income. Prior work has been remarkably consistent with regard to the estimated hazard ratio (HR) for relationship duration for Blacks. These findings are summarized in Table 1. Unfortunately, the HRs associated with income are much more difficult to summarize in a similar table because of dissimilarities in the coding of income across studies.

Interacting and Mediating Factors

Ultimately, two of the most consistent covariates of relationship duration have been race/ethnicity and poverty. The research reviewed above indicates that scholars generally agree that hardship and poverty have contributed to the current partnership and family formation practices occurring among Blacks, making it difficult to disentangle the impact of these two potential explanations. On the other hand, it is possible that there is a compound effect, such that cohabitation and shorter relationships may be more common among poor Blacks as opposed to wealthier Blacks or poor sub-populations that differ by race/ethnicity.

This analysis also considers two additional factors: relationship status (whether one is married or cohabiting) and parental status (whether one has a child from a prior relationship or not). Both of these factors are associated with both race and income but may have their own influence on relationship duration, net of these other factors. For example, in a series of bivariate analyses of NSFG data, Bramlett and Mosher (2002) found that partnership status was strongly associated with both race/ethnicity and income and that partnership status was associated with relationship duration. The findings of Osborne et al. (2007), discussed above, also suggest that relationship disruption is rooted in partnership status. Similarly, Brown and Booth (1996) found that children from past unions negatively affect relationship quality, which in turn is related to relationship duration.

Because the effects of income and race/ethnicity may be confounded with one another as well as with other mediating factors, we used proportional hazards modeling on longitudinal prospective data to parse out the impact of each. Our analysis provides the first quantitative empirical evidence about one aspect of transient domesticity: relationship duration. It also adds to the growing debate about whether poverty alone or cultural adaptations explain transient domesticity.

Urbanicity

Other research suggests an alternative basis to transient domesticity and its growth in recent decades: increasing urban populations that are on the forefront of changing family formation patterns. Broad changes in family formation patterns have occurred among all Americans, not just poor urban Blacks. The urbanicity perspective notes that family forms evolve with changes in technology and broader social arrangements. From this perspective, the long-term nuclear family household that includes a married heterosexual couple and their joint children is a relatively recent ideal and one that will not necessarily endure (Coontz, 2005). The transition from a rural agricultural society to an urban industrial society in the 19th century was accompanied by a decline in family size and an emphasis on the nuclear family (Coale & Watkins, 1986; Davis, 1963; Newson, Postmes, Lea, & Webley, 2005). In this regard, evolving family forms have been associated with the growth of cities and urban residents have been at the vanguard of change.

Beginning in the late 20th century, the United States and other Western countries experienced numerous challenges to the nuclear family as a cultural institution, such as increases in cohabitation, children born outside of marriage, divorce, and a decrease in overall fertility (Buzar, Ogden, & Hall, 2005; Cherlin, 2009; Herz, 2006). Several studies have identified a substantial increase in divorces among the general U.S. population during the 1960s and 1970s and a subsequent plateau starting in the 1980s (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). Using 1985 Current Population Survey data in a proportional hazards model, Kposowa (1998) estimated that divorce was much more common among the poor and among African Americans, as well as among couples not living on a farm, younger women, marriages formed in the 1970s and 1980s versus before 1965, and couples with no joint children. Sweeney and Phillips (2004) used the 1985–1995 Current Population Survey data to examine trends further. They estimated that marital disruption rates for White couples peaked in 1980 and subsequently declined. In contrast, the rate for Blacks continued to increase into the 1990s. By 1993, the rate of marital disruption among Blacks was twice the rate for Whites. Bramlett and Mosher (2002) also found that marital disruption increased across cohorts using the NSFG. The percentage of first marriages ending within 10 years doubled among non-Hispanic Whites from the rate among those married 1950–1954 to those married 1970–1974, after which the rate stabilized. The rate among Blacks married 1950–1954 was higher than for Whites and increased across cohorts, reaching a peak among those married 1980–1984.

This line of research suggests that transient domesticity may actually reflect larger prevailing trends and that shorter relationships observed in transient domesticity research among the impoverished Black population may be associated with urbanicity (living in an urban area, to the extent that urban dwellers are at the forefront of change in family formation patterns) and not necessarily with poverty or cultural adaptations. We include urbanicity in our proportional hazards model as an independent variable to test this effect in light of these demographic trends.

Present Study

In this study, we present findings about partnership duration using longitudinal data collected as part of the SIPP. Our analysis provides empirical demographic evidence that supports the emerging theory of transient domesticity by looking at variation in relationship duration with longitudinal data collected by the 2001 SIPP. We hypothesize that heterosexual partnerships (especially cohabitations) between poor urban Blacks will, on average, be shorter than relationships among individuals who are wealthier, not Black, or live in less urban locations. Each of the primary independent variables (income, race/ethnicity, and urbanicity) is associated with different social forces that potentially forged, contributed to the spread of, or helped sustain this pattern. The regression analysis seeks to disentangle the multiple influences by estimating the variation associated with each variable net of the other variables included in the analysis (Lawless, 1982). This parameterization effectively tests the following hypotheses:

1. *Income hypothesis:* The strains of poverty cause relationship dissolution.
2. *Race/ethnicity hypothesis:* Shorter relationships are embedded within the Black experience, net of the impact of poverty.
3. *Urbanicity hypothesis:* Relationships are tending to be shorter across all race/ethnicity and income groups. In this regard, poor Blacks' experiences are part of larger trend. The vanguard of this trend tends to live in more urban locations. In a sense, this represents a null hypothesis that the experiences of poor Black relationships are neither rooted in poverty or race/ethnicity nor unique to the poor nor to Blacks.
4. *Interaction hypothesis:* Relationships among poor Black urban couples represent a unique phenomenon rooted in the very specific experiences of this highly specific subpopulation.

Hypothesis 4 suggests that the three-way interaction term income $\times$ race/ethnicity $\times$ urbanicity will prove statistically significant and substantial. However, the analysis also tests for the significance of all three two-way interactions under the subsidiary hypothesis that the interaction may be rooted in a two-way as opposed to a three-way interaction.

METHODS

This study examines variation in separation rates across relationship characteristics using 2001 SIPP panel data. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no one has yet published an analysis of relationship duration using the SIPP. The U.S. Census Bureau fields the SIPP primarily to track how national and personal events affect household income, employment, and participation in income transfer programs such as welfare and food stamps (SIPP, 2001). The 2001 SIPP prospectively followed household members, household composition, and economic activity by interviewing multiple members of participating households nine times over the course of 3 years (SIPP, 2001, 2005a). The 2001 SIPP had a recruitment rate of 87% and a 3-year rate of attrition of 35%. The program used a multistage stratified sampling procedure to survey all persons not living in military barracks or an institution such as prison

(SIPP, 2005a, 2005c). A major advantage of the SIPP data is that it is repeated; the Census Bureau draws new panels on an ongoing basis.

The unit of analysis for this study was the coresident couple, including both married and cohabiting couples. The primary unit of analysis for the 2001 SIPP was the household. Each household can potentially include one, more than one, or no couples at all. During the second wave of data collection between June and September 2001, respondents identified how every household member was related to each other (SIPP, 2005a, 2005b). This relationship matrix allowed for the identification of 16,278 couples. Same-sex couples ($n = 87$; 0.5% of all couples) and couples that lacked any data in subsequent waves ($n = 372$; 2.3% of all couples) were excluded from the analysis, which yielded 15,819 heterosexual partnerships with follow-up data. Household members were interviewed in person and over the telephone, on a rotating basis. When new people moved into a household, they were asked to participate in the study. When a household relocated, it was followed. When one or more household members moved out of a household, all of the households containing any members of the original household were followed.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable “relationship duration” was operationalized as the prospective number of months until a couple physically separated. The data for couples still living together at the end of the study were identified as right-censored (Lawless, 1982). The data from Waves 3 to 9 provided information on each partnership’s status for up to 28 months. A separation was inferred as having occurred in the first month in which partners were identified as living in separate households. The SIPP provides a variable that identifies the primary reason a member left a household. However, this variable appeared to greatly underestimate the rate of separation, especially for unmarried partners. Moreover, most often the SIPP did not provide a specific reason for a partner having left; the reason was either not given or identified as “other, unspecified” for over 80% of inferred separations.

Independent Variables

The independent variables included the three hypothesized sources of transient domesticity (poverty, race/ethnicity, and urbanicity), two possible indicators of a less stable relationship that are common in the inner city where transient domesticity occurs (partnership and parenting statuses), and three control variables (woman’s age, age difference, and region). The prevalence rates for the various categories are presented in Table 2.

Marriage (92%) was much more common than cohabitation (8%). Some marriages (7%) broke up within 2 years, but about three times as many more cohabitations (21%) ended within the same period. Parenting statuses identified the biological relationship of all children under the age of 18 living with a couple. The vast majority of couples had either no children (56%) or children with one another only, referred to as joint children (37%). Some had prior children only (4%) or both joint and prior children (3%).

Poverty status was measured at baseline by comparing total household income to the poverty threshold. The poverty threshold was determined based on the composition of the household using U.S. federal standards. Total household income included earned income, return on assets, and income from “other” sources as defined by the SIPP, including benefits from unemployment, social security, veterans’ benefits, and other sources but not means-tested income transfers such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. Not including means-tested income transfers provided a preassistance measurement of poverty status. Three successive income categories were distinguished. A relatively small proportion of the sample qualified as poor (7%), earning less than the poverty threshold. Twice as many were

near poor (15%), earning more than the poverty threshold but less than twice the amount. Most of the sample were wealthier (78%), earning more than twice the poverty threshold.

Regarding race/ethnicity, the primary focus of the analysis was on couples in which both partners were non-Hispanic Blacks (7%). Couples including two non-Hispanic Whites (75%) were included as a comparison group. Couples including two non-Black Hispanics (8%) were included as a second comparison group. The other categories identified the remaining couples in which one partner was Black (2%), one partner was Hispanic (3%) and neither were Black, and other combinations (6%) in which neither partner was Black or Hispanic and both partners were not White. This race/ethnicity variable is limited because it presumes that all Blacks are equally affected by the cultural and historical experiences of the African American family. The variable does not distinguish persons of mixed ancestry or who immigrated to the United States more recently.

Ideally, the study would have included a measure of whether a respondent lived in an urban high-poverty area. However, the Census Bureau does not provide this information in their SIPP public use file. The measure of urbanicity we used indicated whether a couple resided within an officially designated Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA, 76%) or not (24%).

The variation in ages was captured in two variables: woman's age and couples' difference in ages. The most common ages for women partners were the 30s (24%), 40s (24%), and 50 and above (37%). Partners tended to be within 4 years of age of each other (69%). Male partners were older (26%) more often than were female partners (5%). The following standard regions used by the Census Bureau were used in this study: Northeast (19%), Midwest (23%), South (35%), and West (23%).

Analysis

Cox proportional hazards regression was used to analyze how separation risk varied across relationship characteristics (Lawless, 1982). SPSS complex samples procedures were used to obtain unbiased estimates and accurate tests of statistical significance that control for design effects (SPSS, 2009). SIPP data were not explicitly designed as a study of relationships. Accordingly, data on relationship history (such as how long a couple had been together or how many prior relationships each person had) were not collected by the program.

Various models were estimated to test for potentially important interaction terms. The first model included an income $\times$ race/ethnicity cross-term to test whether there was an additional separation risk beyond the main effects associated with being poor and Black. The interaction term was not statistically significant. The next model examined whether there was an interaction term associated with being a poor Black cohabiting couple. The estimated HR was substantial (2.2). However, it was significant at the $p = .10$ but not the $.05$ level. The significance level was the result of a lack of power because the dataset included only 38 poor Black cohabiting couples. Poor Black cohabiting couples may face a higher separation risk, but it would take a much larger sample from this subpopulation to more definitively estimate this interaction term. Finally, a model was specified to examine whether the covariates of relationship duration differed between married and cohabiting couples. Only one of the seven interaction variables, age difference $\times$ cohabiting, was statistically significant at the $p = .05$ level (but not the $p = .01$ level). Cohabiting couples in which the woman was 5 years older (HR = 1.5) or the man was 10 years older (HR = 1.6) were more likely to separate than couples that were closer in age. This analysis of cross-terms and the lack of substantial findings indicated that the main effects model provided a reasonable summary of the variation in relationship duration.

Limitations of Data

A major challenge to the analysis was the treatment of missing data. Some respondents could not be reached for one or more interviews and some became completely lost to follow-up. Three types of missing data were identified for different treatments: inferred breakups, ignorable data gaps, and cases lost to follow-up. A breakup was inferred if the data indicated the residence of one member of a couple but not the other. For these cases, it was assumed that the couple had separated and that one of the partners had chosen not to participate in the SIPP. Another type of missing data occurred when a household did not participate for one or more waves of data collection. In this case, the next available survey information (if any) was examined. The missing data were treated as an ignorable data gap if the first subsequent month for which data were available indicated that the couple was living in the same household. In this case, it was assumed that the partners had been together during the gap period. If there was no later survey information, the case was treated as having been lost-to-follow-up. Cases were similarly designated as having been lost to follow-up if the household data after the gap identified only one partner present. Cases lost to follow-up were identified as right censored after the last month in which data were available.

The cases lost to follow-up could potentially bias the estimates of relationship duration to the extent that couples who separated were more likely to drop out of the SIPP panel. One way to test the extent of this possible bias is to examine whether loss to follow-up was associated with the factors that might also be associated with relationship duration. A weighted total of 13% of all cases were identified as lost to follow-up. Logistic regression was used to identify those covariates associated with loss to follow-up, controlling for the other factors included in the model. The variation associated with three variables was statistically significant ($p = .05$ level). Higher loss to follow-up occurred among couples in which both partners were Black (odds ratio [OR] = 1.7) and Hispanic (OR = 1.7) as opposed to both White. Loss to follow-up decreased with age of the female partner from its highest among teens (OR = 1.6 as compared with couples involving a woman in her 20s) down to its lowest among women partners age 50 and above (OR = 0.5). Loss to follow-up was less common among couples with joint children only (OR = 0.8) compared with those with no children. Loss to follow-up was not associated with partnership status, income, urbanicity, age difference, or region. Thus, the true rate of separation may be higher than estimated in this study among couples that are Black, Hispanic, have prior children or no children, and involve a younger female partner.

Another limitation of this study is that the dependent variable measures separation for any reason. Presumably, separations mostly occurred because a relationship ended. However, separations can include trial separations that might end with reconciliation. Accordingly, the rates of separation we inferred from the SIPP data may be biased upward. For married partners, the date of separation might be a better measure of the end of a relationship than divorce. Not all married couples that separate eventually obtain a divorce. Indeed, Blacks who separate are much less likely to obtain a divorce than Whites (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Sweeney & Phillips, 2004). Additionally, there is usually a substantial lag between the time of separation and divorce. Overall, the consistency of our results with previous findings suggests that the limitations of the SIPP data do not bias the results.

RESULTS

Table 3 examines the relationship of demographic variables (race/ethnicity and income) with relationship variables (partnership and parenting statuses) at baseline. The differences with both race/ethnicity and income are substantial. Poor Black couples as compared with White, Hispanic, and wealthier Black couples were much more likely to be cohabiting and to have children from a prior relationship. The rate of cohabitation declined from 21% among poor

Black couples to 14% among the near poor to 10% among the wealthier. Cohabitation was about as common among poor White (10%) and poor Hispanic (10%) couples as it was among wealthier Black couples (10%). Rates were somewhat lower for wealthier White (6%) and Hispanic (7%) couples. Many poor Black couples had prior children ($22\% = 10.1\% + 11.7\%$). This accounted for 42% of all poor Black couples with children ($21.8\% \div [21.8\% + 30.0\%]$). The prevalence of prior children was about the same among near-poor Black couples (20%) but much lower among wealthier Black couples (10%). The rate among wealthier Black couples (10%) was comparable with the rates among poor White (9%) and Hispanic couples (10%). The rates were somewhat lower among wealthier White (6%) and wealthier Hispanic (7%) couples.

Table 4 presents the results of a proportional hazards regression on the variation in relationship duration. The Wald statistics in Table 4 provide a test of whether the variation associated with each variable was statistically significant. The statistics also provide an approximate indicator of the relative amount of variation associated with each variable. The estimated HRs identify the increased separation risk associated with each characteristic. The most variation was by far associated with partnership status (Wald = 117.2). The risk of separation among cohabiting couples (HR = 2.4) was more than twice as large as among married couples. Couples with children from a prior relationship (1.6) were also substantially more likely to separate than those with no children (1.0). However, the risk was greatly reduced among those couples that had joint children in addition to prior children (0.9). The lowest risk was among couples with joint children only (0.7).

Findings regarding the variation associated with demographic characteristics (poverty and race/ethnicity) and relationship characteristics (partnership and parenting statuses) with relationship length are complex. Partnership and parenting status appear to be mediating variables. Being poor and being Black are both associated with an increased likelihood of cohabitation and having prior children (Table 2; Golub, Strickler, & Dunlap, 2012). On the other hand, income and race/ethnicity still accounted for substantial variation in separation risk even after controlling for cohabitation and prior children. Poor and near-poor couples (HR = 1.6) had a higher separation risk than wealthier couples (HR = 1.0). Regarding race/ethnicity, Black non-Hispanic couples had the highest risk (HR = 1.5). Hispanics had the lowest (HR = 0.8). Urbanicity was not associated with significant variation in separation risk.

Woman's age and couples' difference in age were also associated with variation in separation risk. Partnerships involving women in their teens had twice (HR = 2.0) the separation risk of those involving women in their 20s. The risks were about a third lower for couples involving a woman age 30 and above (HR = 0.6–0.7). Relationships in which the woman was 5 or more years older or the man 10 or more years older were also associated with an increased risk of about one-third (HR = 1.3–1.4).

Figure 1 presents the estimated cumulative rate of separation over time for the reference population and for three different subpopulations based on the parameter estimates for the proportional hazards model in Table 4. The reference population includes couples that were married, had no children, were wealthier, were White, lived in an MSA, involved a woman in her 20s and a man within 5 years of her age, and who lived in the Northeast. According to the proportional hazard model, the separation risk for this for this population was among the lowest (Table 4). For contrast, Figure 1 presents the estimated cumulative rate of separation for our target population: poor cohabiting Black couples with prior children, whose remaining characteristics match the reference population. The graph also examines two types of couples with intermediate risks: wealthier cohabiting White couples with no children and poor married Black couples with no children.

Within a year, a third (33%) of poor cohabiting Black couples with prior children separated. Within 2 years, most of these relationships ended (55%). In contrast, the rate of dissolution among wealthier married White couples with no children was only 4% after 1 year and 9% after 2 years. The rates for wealthier cohabiting White couples with no children was nearly the same as for poor married Black couples with no children: 10% had separated within a year and 19% by 2 years.

DISCUSSION

Relationship Duration

The findings of this study support our hypothesis that poor Black cohabiting relationships demonstrate a higher risk of separation than cohabitations involving persons that differ by income or race/ethnicity. This is consistent with what prior research has suggested about the transient nature of cohabitation for many poor Blacks and specifies the nature of relationship duration for this population. Our analysis reveals that most poor Black cohabitations (55%) last less than 2 years. This information adds important new demographic data to support the transient domesticity paradigm as primarily existing among poor Blacks and involving relatively short nonmarital cohabitations.

Our multivariate analysis indicates that separation risk is higher among cohabiting couples, the poor, and Blacks. Other factors included prior children, a younger woman, and a larger age difference. Poverty may lead to relationship disruption due to various daily stresses or due to a lack of future prospects. The near poor (having an income from 100% to 200% of the poverty threshold) on average fare about as well as the poor with regard to relationship duration. This finding serves as a reminder that the challenges of poverty do not necessarily disappear once household income surpasses a minimum level. Future studies of family formation should not limit their attention to households earning less than the official poverty threshold.

Poverty and Cultural Adaptations

We found support for both Hypotheses 1 and 2: that the risk of separation is influenced independently by income and race. Black couples had a higher separation risk, even after controlling for income. In accordance with our hypothesis, the effect associated with African American race ($HR = 1.5$) was about the same as that associated with being poor or near poor ($HR = 1.6$). This finding contributes to the growing literature finding that Blacks have about a 50% higher risk of separation than Whites. Referring back to Table 1, which lists prior studies of partnership disruption, it is evident that our results support these findings, bolstering its remarkable reliability. This indicates that shorter relationships among Blacks are not just the result of current poverty.

Urbanicity

We did not find support for Hypothesis 3: that urbanicity had an effect on relationship duration. We hypothesized that new norms such as shorter relationships would be more prominent among urban dwellers. However, the variation associated with urbanicity was not statistically significant. This finding is consistent with the following conclusions: Shorter relationships are not an urban trend, and transient domesticity among poor Blacks is not limited to urban communities. The interpretation of this finding, however, is limited by the imprecise urbanicity variable used, which measured only MSA residence and did not distinguish between higher density urban and more suburban areas. Future work should use more specific measures of urbanicity when possible to further this area of inquiry. The findings do not provide support for Hypothesis 4: an interaction effect. Because race and income had independent effects and urbanicity did not have an effect, shorter relationship

duration does not appear to be a trend only among the specific subpopulation of impoverished urban Blacks.

Further Research

These findings suggest several directions for future research on Black families and the concept of transient domesticity. A demographic shift can be identified as a difference across birth cohorts. We included age of the female partner to identify how separation risk varied over the life course. The findings indicated that, controlling for race/ethnicity and income, younger women in the early 2000s tended to have shorter relationships when compared with their older contemporaries. This finding could represent an age effect, that older people tend to have longer relationships, but it could also represent a cohort effect. It is possible that younger persons have shorter relationships because they are more likely to have adopted the new norms (Radford, 1995). To distinguish age and cohort effects, future studies should replicate this analysis using data from subsequent SIPP panels. The analysis could determine if women in their teens and 20s during the early 2000s tended to continue to have shorter relationships as they aged. Left-censoring may alternatively explain this finding. It may be the case that older relationships are more likely to endure and that new relationships are just as likely to dissolve regardless of whether the partners are young or older. This effect could not be estimated with the SIPP data because the program does not collect information about how long a couple had been together at baseline.

Based on the study presented in this article, we make a few recommendations for future improvements to the SIPP that would help demographers and family scholars. Advancing the demographic portion of the survey would also improve policy analysts' ability to track how changes in household composition are associated with income and program participation (or vice versa), the primary focus of the SIPP. It would be useful for the SIPP to collect additional information about relationships. The SIPP could ask respondents whether a relationship separation is expected to be temporary or permanent. Some historical information could also be valuable. The SIPP could obtain information regarding when a couple was married (if at all) and when a couple first moved in together (including any premarital cohabitation). It would also be useful to collect information about prior marriages and cohabitations. However, self-report counts of the number of relationships or start and end dates may be subject to various errors of recall and nondisclosure, especially for those subjects with a complex relationship history as might be associated with transient domesticity. The following straightforward questions may provide concise, accurate, and useful information for many analyses: Have you ever been married before? Have you ever cohabited before with anyone other than your current partner?

Overall, this article provides empirical demographic findings about relationship duration and risk of dissolution among poor Blacks to further develop the emerging theory of transient domesticity. It also advances this body of research by indicating that race, independent of income, is associated with shorter relationship duration among Blacks, whereas urbanicity is not. Future work in this area should continue to explore what is unique about the Black experience, other than disproportionate poverty rates, that predicts transient domesticity and what implications transient domesticity has for parents and children.

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FIGURE 1.
Cumulative Percentage of Partnerships Ending by Partnership Type and Race/ Ethnicity.

TABLE 1

Estimated HRs for Relationship Duration of Blacks Across Datasets and Partnership Types

Study	Dataset	Partnership type	HR ^a
Kposowa (1998)	Current Population Survey	Marriage	1.8
Osborne et al. (2007)	Fragile Families	Marriage and cohabitation	1.7
Teachman (2002)	NSFG	Marriage	1.5
Raley & Bumpass (2003)	NSFG	Marriage	1.5
		Cohabitation	1.4
Golub et al. (present study)	SIPP	Marriage and cohabitation	1.5
Bulanda & Brown (2007)	NSFH	Marriage	1.4
Lichter et al. (2006)	NLSY	Cohabitation	1.0 (n.s.)

^aFor Blacks versus Whites n.s., not statistically significant at the $\alpha = .05$ level.

TABLE 2Demographic Characteristics of SIPP-2001 Wave 2 Partnerships, $n = 15,819$

	Weighted Percent
Partnership status	
Cohabiting	7.9
Married	92.1
Parenting status	
No children	56.0
Joint children only	36.8
Prior children only	4.1
Both joint and prior children	3.2
Household income	
Poor	7.1
Near poor	14.9
Wealthier	78.0
Race/ethnicity	
White non-Hispanic, both	74.5
Black non-Hispanic, both	6.7
Blacks, other combinations	1.6
Hispanic non-Black, both	8.0
Hispanic non-Black, other combinations	3.2
Other	6.0
Urbanicity	
Lives within an MSA	76.0
Lives outside any MSA	24.0
Income–race/ethnicity–urbanicity interaction	
Poor Black	1.0
Poor urban Black	0.7
Age of woman	
18–19	0.7
20–29	13.8
30–39	23.8
40–49	24.4
50+	37.2
Age difference	
Woman 5+ years older	5.4
Ages within 4 years of each other	69.0
Man 5–9 years older	18.3
Man 10+ years older	7.3
Region	
Northeast	19.2
Midwest	22.9

	Weighted Percent
South	35.1
West	22.8
% of Relationships that separated within 2 years ^a	
Among marriages	6.5
Among cohabitations	21.3

Study excludes respondents that reported they were in a same-sex relationship.

^aRelationships that were lost to follow-up are excluded from this calculation.

TABLE 3

Partnership and Parenting Status by Race/Ethnicity and Income

	Percent by Race/Ethnicity and Income									
	Black ^a			White			Hispanic ^b			
	Poor	Near Poor	Wealthier	Poor	Near Poor	Wealthier	Poor	Near Poor	Wealthier	Wealthier
Partnership status ^c										
Cohabiting	21.2	14.2	10.2	10.2	8.5	6.2	10.2	10.6	7.2	7.2
Married	78.8	85.8	89.8	89.8	91.5	93.8	89.8	89.4	92.8	92.8
Parenting status ^c										
No children	48.1	44.1	52.7	51.7	55.5	61.6	20.5	25.2	42.2	42.2
Joint children only	30.0	35.4	37.3	39.1	34.4	32.9	69.9	64.9	51.0	51.0
Prior children only	10.1	8.6	5.7	4.2	4.5	3.5	1.2	4.4	3.3	3.3
Both joint and prior	11.7	11.9	4.3	5.1	5.5	2.0	8.4	5.5	3.6	3.6

^aBoth partners are Black non-Hispanic.^bBoth partners are Hispanic non-Black.^cDifferences across race/ethnicity/income categories are statistically significant at the $p = .01$ level.

TABLE 4

Proportional Hazards Model of Variation in Relationship Duration

Attribute	HR (Wald Statistic)
Partnership status	(117.2) *
Cohabiting	2.4
Married ^a	1.0
Parenting status	(18.6) *
None ^a	1.0
Joint children only	0.7
Prior children only	1.6
Joint and prior children	0.9
Household income	(24.7) *
Poor	1.6
Near poor	1.6
Wealthier ^a	1.0
Race/ethnicity	(6.6) *
White non-Hispanic, both ^a	1.0
Black non-Hispanic, both	1.5
Blacks, other combinations	1.3
Hispanic non-Black, both	0.8
Hispanic non-Black, other combinations	1.4
Other	0.9
Urbanicity	(0.7)
Lives within an MSA ^a	—
Lives outside any MSA	—
Age of woman	(16.6) *
<20	2.0
20–29 ^a	1.0
30–39	0.6
40–49	0.6
50+	0.7
Age difference	(8.1) *
Woman 5+ years older	1.3
Within 4 years ^a	1.0
Man 5–9 years older	1.0
Man 10+ years older	1.4
Region	(0.6)
Northeast ^a	—
Midwest	—
South	—

Attribute	HR (Wald Statistic)
West	—

^aReference category.

* Statistically significant at the $\alpha = .01$ level.

—, Estimate not shown because the variation was not statistically significant.