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Correlates of Male Cohabiting Partner's Involvement in Childrearing Tasks in Low-Income Urban Black Stepfamilies

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Abstract

Cohabitation is a family structure experienced by many Black children. This study examines the link between family relationships (child relationship with mother and the cohabiting partner; parent and cohabiting partner relationship) and involvement of biologically unrelated male cohabiting partners (MCP) in childrearing. The participants were 121 low-income urban Black families consisting of a single mother, MCP, and an adolescent (56% female, M age = 13.7). Assessments were conducted individually with mothers, MCPs, and adolescents via measures administered by interview. MCPs were involved in both domains of childrearing assessed (Daily Child-Related Tasks and Setting limits) and those identified as coparents by the mother were more involved in childrearing tasks than those not identified as coparents. Using structural equation modeling (SEM), the mother-MCP relationship (both support and conflict) and the adolescent-MCP relationship were related to MCP's involvement in both domains of childrearing. The findings indicate that MCPs are actively involved in childrearing and family relationship variables are associated with their involvement in these tasks.

Keywords

Male cohabiting partners; coparenting; Black stepfamilies; family relationships

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Almost three-quarters of Black children are born out of wedlock (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2011) and raised in what has traditionally been identified as mother custodial single-parent families (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Jones & Lindahl, 2011). However, there are often biologically unrelated male cohabiting partners (MCP) residing in these "single mother" families (Dunlap, Golub, & Benoit, 2010; Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010). For example, Kreider (2007) found that for Black children living in poverty, almost 10% had a

MCP, and Bumpass and Lu (2000) reported that 40% of children will spend some time before age 16 in a cohabiting stepfamily. Furthermore, the number of cohabiting stepfamilies is rapidly increasing (see Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Huang, Smock, Manning, & Bergstrom-Lynch, 2011), making the study of this family structure critical for understanding and enhancing the psychosocial adjustment of children and adolescents (Manning & Lamb, 2003).

An MCP potentially can serve as a stepfather or “social father” for a child (e.g., Bzostek, 2008), engaging in coparenting activities with the biological mother. His involvement in coparenting may enhance the parenting of children in the household relative to a single parent family; alternately, family roles may not be clearly defined as cohabiting fathers do not have the rights of married fathers and a weak MCP-child relationship may exist, which can hinder parenting (see Cherlin, 1978; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Manning & Lamb, 2003; Thompson & McLanahan, 2012). Furthermore, many uneducated, low income Black men do not have role models for how to become involved parents (Roy, 2006). Recent research by Carlson and Berger (2013) suggests that residential social fathers are in fact less involved with children than other types of residential fathers (e.g., married social fathers, cohabiting biological fathers).

In this study, we build on our prior qualitative (Dunlap et al., 2010) and quantitative (e.g., Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, Foster, Brody, & Armistead, 2005; Parent, Jones, Forehand, Cuellar, & Shoulberg, 2013) research on coparenting with three different samples. Specifically, we recruited and studied low-income urban cohabiting couples in Black stepfamilies raising an adolescent age child. In an initial study with the current sample, Golub and Reid (2013) examined families where the cohabiting partner could be a female *or* male and examined the distribution of a range of domestic labor tasks (e.g., household chores) across the custodial parent and cohabiting partner. In this paper we focus on the subsample of stepfamilies that included a custodial mother and an unrelated MCP and focus specifically on childrearing tasks and their family correlates. Residents in the stepfamilies included a biological mother, an adolescent age child (10 to 17 years), and a MCP who was not biologically related to the child. Our primary goal was to examine if family relationships (e.g., mother-MCP relationship, adolescent-MCP relationship) were linked with the MCP's involvement in two domains: Daily child-related tasks and setting limits. Both of these parenting activities are important for prosocial behaviors of children and adolescents (e.g., Bzostek, 2008; Dishion & McMahon, 1998). We focus on a predominantly low-income sample as Family Stress Theory highlights the impact of financial strain on compromises in parenting (see Conger & Donnellan, 2007, for a review). Furthermore, Black families living in urban environments face a multitude of stressors (e.g., Forehand et al., 2000). Therefore, the involvement of an MCP in childrearing tasks may be particularly important in these families.

Are MCPs Active in Childrearing Tasks?

From a family systems theoretical perspective (Fagan & Cabrera, 2012; also see Carlson & Hognas, 2011), a male cohabiting partner (MCP) can impact the family as he is involved in both mother and child subsystems within the family. Furthermore, from the same theoretical

perspective, his involvement in tasks such as coparenting is influenced by these family subsystems (see Steeger & Gondoli, 2013). Drawing from Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson's (1998) conceptual model of responsible fatherhood, a father's involvement in parenting has been viewed as "a more contextually sensitive process than mothering" (p. 287) (also see King, Ledwell, & Amato, 2013). These contextual influences (e.g., cultural expectations, economic factors, social support) may be particularly salient for MCPs who, as has been noted, have less defined roles in the family. The extent of an MCP's involvement in childrearing tasks does appear to vary as a function of several factors, including his investment in the family's stability as a family unit and maternal gatekeeping (i.e., the extent to which the biological mother allows him to be involved) (see Dush, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004; Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008).

Some of our recent work (Parent et al., 2013) suggests that a residential coparent may be *less* involved in childrearing than a non-residential coparent. *However*, the Parent et al. sample was primarily constituted by grandparents, aunts, and biological fathers as coparents; furthermore, research by Hernandez and Coley (2007) indicates that biological residential fathers are more involved in childrearing than non-residential biological fathers. Our recent examination of the current sample suggests that custodial parents are more involved in childrearing generally than non-custodial parents and that mothers are more involved than fathers regardless of custody status (Golub & Reid, 2013). In this investigation, we move beyond the Parent et al., Hernandez and Coley, and Golub and Reid studies by focusing only on cohabiting men, who are not biological fathers, as coparents. Some qualitative research suggests that MCPs are highly involved in childrearing (Dunlap et al., 2010; also see Tach & Edin, 2011, for a review) and two quantitative studies from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being dataset indicate they are as involved with preschool children as are residential biological fathers (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008; Bzostek, 2008). However, relative to pre-schoolers, older children and adolescents may be more likely to resist an MCP's involvement (Bzostek, 2008); therefore, identification of specific childrearing tasks that an MCP in low-income urban Black families performs in coparenting an adolescent deserves attention and is the focus of this investigation.

In the current study we examined if identification as a coparent [i.e., two adults who "take on the care and the upbringing of children for whom they share responsibility" (McHale & Lindahl, p.3)] would be associated with more involvement in childrearing activities by MCPs. In order to provide a benchmark for involvement, we contrasted the scores on childrearing activities of MCPs with those of mothers. Recent research by Carlson and Berger (2013) found that mothers engage in approximately five times as many activities with their children than MCPs.

Family Relationship Correlates of Involvement in Childrearing Tasks

As we have noted, male cohabiting partners (MCPs) are involved in relationships in both mother and child subsystems within a stepfamily. These relationships, as well as the mother-adolescent relationship, may be linked to the extent of involvement of MCPs in childrearing activities in low-income urban families (see Doherty et al., 1998). These are likely

transactional in that these relationships may influence involvement which, in turn, may influence the relationships. The current study represents an important first step in identifying the association between dyadic family relationships and MCP involvement. We focus on four relationships: mother-MCP conflict about childrearing; mother-MCP support around childrearing; mother-adolescent relationship; and MCP-adolescent relationship. We draw from the broader coparenting literature (e.g., King et al., 2013) to develop hypotheses as the research with MCPs for adolescent age children is limited.

As Jones and Lindahl (2011) have noted, most research on coparenting has focused on conflict and support about childrearing. More father involvement in childrearing has been associated with more conflict between mother and father (e.g., Fagan & Cabrera, 2012; Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011). While perhaps counterintuitive at first glance, two explanations have been proposed for this findings (Fagan & Cabrera, 2012; Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011). First, mothers and fathers may not have the same standards for parenting children and these differing standards may result in conflict when childrearing tasks are shared. Second, when fathers become more involved in childrearing, maternal gatekeeping may increase because of a sense of loss of control over childrearing, resulting in higher levels of conflict. However, it is important to note that both the Fagan and Cabrera study and the Jia and Schoppe-Sullivan study examined father involvement with preschool children in married, predominately Caucasian, families; therefore, the implications of their findings for our sample of Black stepfamilies with an MCP and an adolescent child are unclear.

The absence of conflict does not guarantee a supportive relationship. Among the critical components of a supportive relationship are valuing the role of the coparent, respecting the judgment of the coparent, and ongoing communication about the child's needs (see Dush et al., 2011). Not surprisingly, a supportive relationship has been linked to more involvement in childrearing by married and unmarried fathers in most (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007; Rienks, Wadsworth, Markman, Einhorn, & Etter, 2011; Ryan, Kalel, & Ziol-Guest, 2008), but not all (Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011), of the literature.

The mother-child relationship also may be associated with the extent of a MCP's involvement in childrearing (see Jensen & Shafer, 2013; King, 2006). When an adolescent has a positive relationship with her or his mother, he or she may be more likely to accept a MCP's role in the family system and promote his involvement in childrearing. Furthermore, a positive mother-child relationship may allow a mother to encourage her adolescent to accept the MCP's involvement. Finally, the child's relationship with the MCP could be related to his involvement in childrearing. When the relationship is negative, a child, particularly an adolescent, may be less willing to accept involvement by the MCP and, in turn, the MCP may be less invested in being involved.

The Current Study

The current study builds on earlier research assessing male cohabiting partner (MCP) involvement in childrearing from the perspective of the biological mother (e.g., Berger et al., 2008; Bzostek, 2008). Specifically, we assessed not only the perspective of the mother but that of the MCP and the adolescent. The agreement among reporters in cohabiting families is

lower than in other family structures (i.e., two biological parents, married stepfamilies, single-mother families) (Brown & Manning, 2009), suggesting the importance of obtaining multiple perspectives in families with an MCP.

We propose and test two hypotheses concerning the family structure of cohabitation. First, MCPs identified as coparents will be more involved in multiple domains of childrearing activities than those not identified as coparents. This hypothesis is based on Doherty et al.'s (1998) conceptual model of responsible fatherhood: MCPs viewed as coparents should have a stronger role identification as a parent and, thus, are more involved in parenting than those not viewed as coparents. However, as Doherty et al. point out, mothers in general are substantially more involved in childrearing than fathers, particularly social fathers (also see Berger & Langton, 2011; Carlson & Berger, 2013), suggesting that MCPs will be less involved than biological mothers. Second, drawing from the literature and from Doherty et al.'s notion of father involvement being a contextual sensitive process, we propose that more involvement in childrearing tasks by an MCP will be related to higher levels of conflict between mother and MCP, but a more supportive coparenting relationship and a better relationship of the adolescent with both the mother and the MCP. We examine the association of each of the family subsystems of relationships (mother-MCP conflict) with multiple domains of childrearing tasks simultaneously as research and theory indicates that the subsystems are not independent of one another (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001). In particular, the simultaneous examination of mother-MCP conflict and support will shed light on the relative association of these two constructs with MCP involvement.

Method

Participants

Participants were 121 Black single-mother families with a male cohabiting partner and a child in the 10 to 17 year age range living in New York City.¹ The mean ages of participating youth, mothers, and MCPs were 13.17 years ($SD = 1.97$; 56.2% girls), 38.5 years ($S.D. = 7.86$), and 40.66 ($S.D. = 10.74$), respectively. Of the mothers, 38%, 33%, and 29% did not complete high school, completed high school/GED, and some college/vocational school after high school, respectively. Of the MCPs, 29%, 57%, and 14% did not complete high school, completed high school/GED, and had some college/vocational school after high school, respectively. Household incomes averaged \$22,726 per year ($SD = \$18,442$). In all families at least one of the two adults (mother or MCP) identified as Black. The mean number of children per family was 2.09 ($SD = 1.30$). Sixty-two percent of the mother-MCP relationships were "established" (13 months or greater) and 38% were "new" (12 months or less).

Procedure

The National Development and Research Institute (NDRI) Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the study. All participants initially signed consent (mother/MCP)

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¹This analysis excluded 12 families in which the father was the custodial parent and 3 families in which the child was the MCP's biological child and the parents had only recently moved in together. The full sample includes 136 Black cohabiting families.

and assent (adolescent) forms. Study participants were recruited in 2011–2012 by field staff members experienced in working with low-income Black residents of New York City. Field staff used existing networks of research study participants, field informants, street recruiting, and social services agency contacts to recruit potential participants. The mother and adolescent had to agree to participate and the MCP was urged to participate. Families completed the assessment either at a community site or in their home, according to the preferences of each family. Family members completed the assessments separately and privately with interviewers, who entered the responses into a computer database. The mothers, MCPs, and adolescents completed measures assessing a range of variables related to personal and family psychosocial functioning, including the variables of focus in the current study. Each interview took approximately 60 minutes to complete; adults were compensated \$40 and adolescent were compensated \$20 for their participation.

Control Variables

Key demographic variables that may influence male cohabiting partner (MCP) involvement in childrearing tasks (e.g., mother and MCP education, adolescent age) were assessed. Furthermore, as child problem behaviors and both mother and MCP depressive symptoms can impact MCP involvement (e.g., see Rienks, Wadsworth, Markman, Einhorn, & Etter, 2011), each of these was assessed.

Demographic Information—Mothers and MCPs responded to demographic questions about themselves (e.g., age, race, education), their families (e.g., family income), and the length of their relationship (established = greater than 12 months or new = 12 months or less). Youth reported on their gender and age.

Adolescent Internalizing and Externalizing Problems—Child internalizing and externalizing problems were assessed by the Youth Self-Report (YSR; adolescent-report) (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Reliability and validity of the YSR are well-established for the internalizing and externalizing dimensions (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). The alpha coefficient for the YSR internalizing and externalizing problems was .82 and .87, respectively, for the current sample.

Parent/Partner Depressive Symptoms—Adult depressive symptom severity was assessed by the 9-item Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams (2001), which is a self-report version of the Primary Care Evaluation of Mental Disorders (Spitzer, Kroenke, & Williams, 1999) diagnostic instrument for psychiatric disorders. Each item is scored from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*nearly every day*) (scale range: 0 to 27). Scores are summed and scores of 5, 10, 15, and 20 represented mild, moderate, moderately severe, and severe depression, respectively (Kroenke et al., 2001). The PHQ-9 has demonstrated strong psychometric properties in a recent meta-analysis (Gilbody, Richards, Brealey, & Hewitt, 2007). In the current sample, the alpha coefficient was .86 and .87 for mother report and MCP report, respectively.

MCP Identity As A Coparent

The mother responded to the following question: “Do you consider your current partner to be a coparent to (focal child)?” Similarly the adolescent responded to the following question: “Do you consider your mother’s current live-in partner to be a parent to you?” Responses were coded as 0 (*no*) or 1 (*yes*). A coparent was defined for mothers as “another person who currently helps parent (the focal child’s name)” and for adolescents as “another person who currently helps parent you.”

Stepfamily Relationships

Coparenting Support—Coparenting support was assessed by the mother and MCP on the Communication and Support subscales of the Parenting Convergence Scale (PCS; Ahrons, 1981). The Support subscale consists of two items [“When you need help with (target child), how often do you go to (partner/custodial parent) for help?” and “How often would you say that (partner/custodial parent) is a help to you in raising this child?”] rated on a (1) “*none/very little*” to (5) “*a lot*” Likert scale with higher scores indicating more coparenting support. The Communication subscale consists of two items [“How often do you and (partner/custodial parent) make major decisions together about (target child’s) life?” and “How often do you and (partner/custodial parent) talk to each other about (target child’s) achievements and how well she/he is doing?”] rated on the same 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating more coparenting communication. As only two items constitute each of these scales, a correlation coefficient was calculated for each reporter. The two items on the Support subscale and on the Communication subscale were highly correlated for mother ($r = .59$ & $r = .80$, $p < .001$ in each case) and partner ($r = .50$ & $r = .65$, $p < .001$ in each case) report. The support subscale and the communication subscale were each summed for mother and for MCP.

Coparenting Conflict—Both conflict about childrearing that occurred in front of the child and general coparenting conflict about childrearing were assessed. The former was assessed by mother and MCP report on the O’Leary-Porter Scale (OPS; Porter & O’Leary, 1980). The OPS is comprised of 10 items which mothers/MCPs rated on a scale ranging from 0 = *Never* to 4 = *Very Often*, with higher scores indicating more conflict in front of the child. The scale, which primarily measures verbal hostility, has excellent reliability (Porter & O’Leary, 1980). Internal consistency for mother ($\alpha = .78$) and MCP ($\alpha = .81$) report in the current sample was good.

Two items from the Conflict subscale of the Parenting Convergence Scale (PCS; Ahrons, 1981) were used to assess general coparenting conflict from the perspective of the mother and MCP (e.g., “When you and (coparent/custodial parent) talk about how to raise the target child, how often is the conversation hostile or angry?”). The items were rated on a (1) “*none/very little*” to (5) “*a lot*” scale with higher scores indicating more coparenting conflict. The two items on the Conflict subscale were highly correlated for mother ($r = .46$, $p < .001$) and partner ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) report. The two items were summed for the mother and for the MCP.

Mother-adolescent and MCP-adolescent relationship—The Acceptance vs. Rejection subscale of the 30-item version of the Children's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (CRPBI-30; Schuldermann & Schuldermann, 1988) was used to assess the mother-adolescent and MCP-adolescent relationship. Adolescents indicated whether each parent/coparent is "like," "somewhat like," or "not like" such statements as "Enjoys talking things over with me." Higher scores indicate a more positive parent-adolescent relationship (i.e., more acceptance and closeness). The Acceptance/Rejection factor has been shown to be internally consistent and convergent and discriminant validity has been well demonstrated in prior research (see McKee et al., 2013, for a review). Internal consistency for adolescent report on the mother ($\alpha = .72$) and MCP ($\alpha = .74$) was adequate for the current sample. The subscale was summed for the mother and for the MCP.

Childrearing Activities

"Who Does What?" questionnaire (WDW)—The original WDW measure (Cowan & Cowan, 1988, 1990) was designed to examine domestic tasks each member of a couple performed before and after having a child. The original WDW consisted of three scales of 12 items each that ask partners to describe the couple's division of tasks in three areas: (1) household tasks; (2) family decision making; and (3) the caring for and rearing of children. Items were rated on a 1–9 scale for "How it is now," with 1 indicating that the woman does it all, 9 indicating that the man does it all, and 5 showing that partners share the task about equally (Cowan & Cowan, 1988). The WDW was later revised for children of different ages (Cowan & Cowan, 1990) and involved additions and modification of the caring for and rearing of children subscale with age appropriate items. There are a total of 19 items about child care and rearing for adolescent age children.

The WDW was adapted for the current study in the following ways: (a) questions were adapted for verbal administration; (b) three separate prompts were used for the three different areas of involvement; and (c) the mother and MCP responded on a 5-point Likert scale rating herself/himself and then rating the partner. Specifically, for household and family tasks questions, the responder was asked, "Please tell me how often you do the following house chores?" and responses were rated on a 5-point scale from 0 [*Almost never* (0–10%)] to 4 [*Almost always* (91–100%)]; for the family decision making questions, the responder was asked, "please tell me how much influence you have in the following decisions?" and responses were rated on a 5-point scale from 0 (*No influence*) to 4 (*All of the influence*); and lastly, for the caring for and rearing of children questions, the responder was asked, "please tell me how often you participate in the following parenting activities?" and responses were rated on a 5-point scale from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Very often*). When the responder rated her/his partner, appropriate wording changes occurred (e.g., "Please tell me how often your partner does the following household chores?").

Two subscales from the Who Does What were developed from prior factor analysis performed on the current sample (Parent, Clifton, et al., 2013): Daily Child-related Tasks (DCT: 7 items, e.g., monitoring child's bedtime, helping when child has problems with siblings, friends, or teachers) and Setting limits (SL; 3 items, disciplining, setting limits for child, monitoring with whom the child spends time). Mothers, male cohabiting partners, and

adolescents reported on MCP involvement in both DCT and SL. Internal consistency was good ranging from .82 to .89 for Daily Child-rearing Tasks and from .82 to .92 for Setting limits. Items were summed for each informant for each subscale.

Data Analytic Plan

Missing Data

Missing data ranged by reporter with 1.41% missing for mother-report variables, 4.27% for adolescent-report variables, and 24% for MCP-report variables. The large percentage of missing data for MCP report was due to 30 of the MCPs not participating in the study. Not surprisingly, the MCPs who did not participate in the study were rated by mothers and adolescent as being less involved in childrearing [(DCT; mother: $F[1, 114] = 54.5, p < .05$, Youth: $F[1, 112] = 4.2, p < .05$) (SL; mother: $F[1, 114] = 7.3, p < .01$, Youth: $F[1, 112] = 6.4, p < .05$)]. As a consequence, when we examined MCPs as coparents and preliminary analyses of control variables, we used SPSS 21 and performed multiple imputation (MI) as recommended by Schafer and Graham (2002) using a Bayesian-based Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) procedure with the inclusion of auxiliary variables (e.g., demographic variables, parenting, coparenting, parent well-being, child behavior) to increase the power of the MI procedures. Pooled statistics across five imputations are reported. For latent constructs, indicators were standardized and summed to create composite variables for preliminary analyses.

MCPs as Coparents

To examine the role of male cohabiting partners (MCPs) as coparents, we examined agreement between mother and adolescent about whether the MCP was a coparent. We then examined if the mother's identification of the MCP as a coparent was related to his involvement in childrearing tasks. Finally, we examined means and correlations among mother, MCP, and adolescent report of mother's and MCP's involvement in childrearing tasks.

Preliminary Analysis of Control Variables

Correlations between continuous control variables and MCP involvement in childrearing tasks were examined. The relationship between categorical demographic variables (e.g., parent education) and MCP involvement in childrearing tasks was examined by analysis of variance.

Stepfamily Relationships and MCP Involvement in Childrearing Activities

Structural equation modeling was used to examine the measurement model and the structural model in order to identify the link among family relationship variables and MCP involvement in childrearing tasks.

Evaluation of the measurement model—A confirmatory factor analytic measurement model was estimated prior to estimating structural models in order to test the fit of the factor structures under investigation and to determine the factor loadings for each indicator.

Evaluation of the structural model—Structural equation modeling (SEM) using maximum likelihood estimation (MLR) with robust standard errors to adequately account for skewed data, as implemented by Mplus 6.1 software (Muthen & Muthen, 1998–2010), was employed. The following fit statistics were used to evaluate model fit with a small sample: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; < .10 acceptable, < .05 excellent), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; > .90 acceptable, > .95 excellent), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR; < .08 acceptable, < .05 excellent) (Hu & Bentler, 1999; MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996). Full information maximum likelihood estimation techniques were used for inclusion of all available data.

Effects of covariates on the model—The effects of covariates on the model were examined by running multiple-indicator/multiple-cause (MIMIC; Muthen, 1989) models in which all major constructs of the final structural model were regressed on each covariate separately. If paths in the structural model remained significant with the inclusion of these control variables, it was concluded that the control variables did not directly influence the relationships among variables in the model.

Results

MCPs As Coparents

Seventy-five percent of mothers and 69% of adolescents reported that the male cohabiting partner (MCP) was a coparent. In 79% of the cases, mother and adolescent agreed about the MCP being or not being a coparent.

Our first hypothesis was that MCPs viewed as coparents will be more involved in childrearing activities than those not identified as coparents. We used the mother's report of MCP's coparenting status to address this hypothesis. The mean score (averaged across the three reporters) for Daily Child-Related Tasks were 12.17 and 5.29 for MCPs identified and not identified as a coparent ($t(116) = 34.24, p < .001$), respectively. The mean scores (averaged across reporters) for Setting Limits were 6.2 and 3.4 for MCPs identified and not identified as a coparent ($t(116) = 21.29, p < .001$), respectively. As MCP coparent status was related to the outcome variables, mother report of this variable served as a covariate for the SEM examining the link between family relationship variables and MCP involvement in childrearing activities (reported below).

We also examined means for and correlations among mother, MCP, and adolescent report of the mother's and MCP's Daily Child-related Tasks and Setting Limits. By examining the means, the second part of the first hypothesis can be examined: MCPs will be less involved than mothers in childrearing. As depicted in Table 1, for all reporters mothers' scores on both childrearing activities were approximately twice as large as those of the MCP (in all cases, t values $> 11.05, p < .001$). Also, of note in Table 1 is that all correlations among reporters were significant and moderate in strength. Correlations between reporter's scores in the childrearing domains ranged from .37 to .63, which is similar to the range previously reported for the original WDW measure (Cowan & Cowan, 1990).

Preliminary Analyses of Control Variables

For demographic variables, neither mother nor MCP education level was significantly associated with MCP involvement in Daily Child-related Tasks (DCT; mother: $F [4, 117] = .74, p > .10$, MCP: $F [4, 78] = 1.44 p > .10$) or Setting Limits (SL; $F [4, 117] = .44 p > .10$, MCP: $F [4, 78] = .17 p > .10$). Mother-MCP relationship length (new 0–12 months, established 13+ months) also was not significantly related to Daily Child-Related Tasks ($F [1, 120] = 1.13, p > .10$) or Setting Limits ($F [1, 120] = .55, p > .10$). Additionally, male cohabiting partner involvement in Daily Child-related Tasks ($F [1, 120] = 1.9, p > .10$) or Setting limits ($F [1, 120] = 1.6, p > .10$) did not differ significantly by child gender. Therefore, parental education, relationship length, nor child gender were included in the MIMIC models as covariates.

Adolescent age ($r = -.32, p < .01$) was associated with Daily Child-Related Tasks such that MCPs were more involved with younger adolescents. Thus, adolescent age (and not parental education, relationship length, or child gender) served as one of the covariates to be examined in the MIMIC models. Mother and MCP depressive symptoms and adolescent internalizing and externalizing problems were not significantly related to Daily Child-Related Tasks and Setting Limits (all $r < .10$). Nevertheless, as all of these variables were theoretically relevant covariates which could influence the pathways in the context of the family relationship variables studied, they were included as covariates in the MIMIC models along with adolescent age and whether or not the male cohabiting partner was considered a coparent.

Stepfamily Relationships and MCP Involvement in Childrearing Activities

Evaluation of the measurement model—As indicated in the Data Analytic Plan, SEM using MLR was employed. In all models, the first indicator for each latent factor was set at 1.0 to establish the metric, and all factors were allowed to covary freely. Standardized factor loadings are reported. Inspection of the initial measurement model suggested a few areas for improving fit by allowing the correlation between residuals of pairs of indicators: adolescent, mother and MCP report on the Daily Child-Related Tasks and Setting Limits; and MCP report on the PCS Support and Communication subscales. The above pairings of correlated error were indicators of similar constructs as reported by the same family member. Therefore, there are substantive reasons that the above pairs would have correlated error. All factor loadings were significant and are displayed in Figure 1. The final measurement model demonstrated good fit: $X^2 (67, N = 121) = 95.57, p = .013$, RMSEA = .06, 95% CI .03–.09, CFI = .95, SRMR = .09.

Evaluation of the structural model—A summary of the paths in the structural model is presented in Table 2 and the primary hypothesized variables are depicted in Figure 1 without covariates for clarity of presentation. The proposed model demonstrated acceptable fit: $X^2 (87, N = 121) = 145.78, p < .05$, RMSEA = .075, 95% CI .05–.10, CFI = .91, SRMR = .08). Coparenting support, coparenting conflict, and the adolescent-MCP relationship were positively related to MCP involvement in both Child-Related Tasks and Setting Limits. The adolescent-mother relationship was not significantly related to either childrearing construct. Of note, coparenting support was positively associated with both the mother's and the

MCP's relationship with the adolescent. In addition, the two childrearing activities were not significantly related nor were coparenting conflict and support (see bottom of Table 2).

MIMIC Models—The effects of child's age, coparent status, mother's depressive symptom severity, MCP's depressive symptom severity, and youth-reported internalizing and externalizing were tested by running MIMIC models. MCP involvement in Daily Childrearing Tasks and Setting limits were regressed on each of the covariates (one covariate per model). When accounting for MCP's depressive symptoms, the paths from both coparent conflict and adolescent-MCP relationship quality to MCP involvement in daily child-rearing tasks were reduced to marginal significance due to increased standard errors, and in the case of coparent conflict, the standardized estimate was reduced in magnitude ($\beta = .37$ to $\beta = .21$). All other pathways were unaffected by the inclusion of the covariates in the model. Of the covariates examined in the MIMIC models, MCP depressive symptoms and coparent status were positively related to MCP involvement in Daily Child-related Tasks, and adolescent age was negatively related to MCP involvement in Daily Child-related Tasks. None of the covariates were related to MCP involvement in Setting Limits.

Discussion

Almost three-quarters of Black children in the United States are born out of wedlock (Hamilton et al., 2011) with cohabitation being the family structure for many of them (see Huang et al., 2011). Drawing from Doherty et al.'s (1998) conceptual model of responsible fathering and family systems theory (Fagan & Cabrera, 2012), the purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which male cohabiting partners (MCPs) are involved in parenting adolescents in Black low-income urban stepfamilies and to examine if this involvement is associated with relationship subsystems (mother-MCP, mother-adolescent, & adolescent-MCP) in the family. Our findings indicated that MCPs were involved in the coparenting of adolescents in the domains of daily child-related tasks and setting limits, and relationships in multiple subsystems (e.g., mother-MCP relationship) were independently linked to this involvement. Both of these domains of involvement have been identified as important for child and adolescent mental health outcomes (e.g., Bzostek, 2008; Dishion & McMahon, 1998).

In the majority of stepfamilies participating in this study, MCPs are perceived by mother and adolescent as a coparent and most mothers and adolescents are in agreement about whether or not an MCP serves as a coparent. Furthermore, congruent with findings from some (Berger et al, 2008; Bzostek, 2008), but not all (Berger & Carlson, 2013), studies with preschool children, our findings suggest that MCPs play an active role in daily child-related tasks and setting limits with youth in the adolescent age range. Not surprisingly, those who are identified as coparents are more active in parenting than those not identified as coparents; however, and again not surprisingly, the level of involvement by MCPs is less than the custodial mother. As we suggested earlier, the level of MCP involvement is likely a function of both his investment in the family's stability and maternal gatekeeping (see Doherty et al., 1998). Future studies could directly assess both of these constructs in order to ascertain their role in MCP involvement.

Our hypotheses about how family relationships would relate to the involvement of MCPs in childrearing in low-income urban Black stepfamilies were, with one exception, confirmed. As expected, more involvement was related to more support in coparenting. Our study extends most previous research about the link between these two constructs (e.g., Rienks et al., 2011) to MCPs living in homes with an adolescent age child. The strength of the pathways (i.e., beta coefficients) (see Figure 1) suggests that supportive coparenting is a particularly important correlate of MCP involvement. When a mother actively communicates with an MCP about her child and seeks his involvement, the MCP is more likely to be involved. And once he is involved, a mother's support for his efforts is likely to further increase. This suggests that a transactional process potentially occurs. The cross-sectional nature of the data prevents testing this process; nevertheless, the findings are congruent with the idea that strengthening supportive coparenting (e.g., making decisions about the adolescent collaboratively) can lead to more MCP involvement in childrearing activities.

Not only was more support associated with more MCP involvement but so was more conflict. As we indicated earlier, this relationship between mother-MCP conflict and MCP involvement in child-related tasks may appear initially as counter-intuitive. However, the findings are congruent with those of Fagan and Cabrera (2012) and Jia and Schoppe-Sullivan (2011) with predominantly Caucasian married couples with preschool children. Thus, the two explanations offered by these investigators may well apply to our findings. First, mothers and MCPs may not have the same standards for parenting children and these differing standards may result in conflict when childrearing tasks are shared. Second, when MCPs become more involved in childrearing, maternal gatekeeping may increase because of a sense of loss of control over childrearing, resulting in higher levels of conflict. The agreement across samples with highly different demographic characteristics suggests higher levels of conflict, even in the context of a supportive relationship with the mother, is associated with more involvement by male partners. Determination of the causal ordering of variables is not possible with the cross-sectional nature of the data.

A more positive adolescent-MCP relationship also was associated with more involvement in childrearing by the MCP. Again, conclusions about cause-and-effect cannot be reached because of the cross-sectional nature of the data. Nevertheless, we would propose that, similar to supportive coparenting, a transactional process may be operating: A better relationship leads an adolescent to be more accepting of an MCP's involvement which leads to an MCP being more invested in being involved, thereby enhancing the relationship. This reciprocal process then continues to repeat itself.

Several additional aspects of our study are worth noting. First, the mother-adolescent relationship was not associated with MCP involvement in either childrearing task. Prior research has examined closeness of children to a stepfather and found that the mother-child relationship is important (Jensen & Shafer, 2013; King, 2006). The difference in the outcome measure (closeness vs. involvement) and/or the focus only on MCPs in Black cohabiting stepfamilies in the current study may account for the different findings. Second, a coparenting supportive relationship, higher levels of mother-MCP conflict, and the adolescent-MCP relationship *each* made independent contributions to *both* of the two

childrearing activities examined. This suggests that each of these constructs contribute to our understanding of MCP involvement. In addition, similar links from relationship variables to each domain of childrearing emerged, suggesting that relationships within the family play a similar role in the two domains of childrearing examined. Third, the absence of a relationship between coparent conflict and support (see Table 2) and their independent contributions to childrearing activities suggest the importance of assessing both constructs and not assuming they are opposite ends of the same continuum. Finally, mother, adolescent, and MCP completion of the Who Does What scale loaded on the two subscales of interest: Daily Child-Related Tasks and Setting Limits. Similarly, both mother and MCP report of support and conflict loaded on the constructs of Coparenting Support and Coparenting Conflict. These findings, as well as the strength of the correlations among reporters, are important as they indicate that the perspectives of various family members are converging on the constructs we were attempting to assess.

The findings should be considered in the context of the limitations and strengths of the study. In terms of limitations, as we have noted, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents causal conclusions from being reached. The processes occurring between dyadic family variables and MCP involvement are likely transactional rather than uni-directional. Second, our assessment on childrearing was limited to two activities (daily child-related tasks and setting limits) and focused on quantity, not quality, of these activities by the MCP. Other childrearing activities or how the MCP undertook and completed the activities (e.g., use of positive parenting, absence of criticism) may have yielded different outcomes. Third, although MCP depressive symptoms were not correlated with either childrearing tasks in preliminary analyses, inclusion of these symptoms in the MIMIC model reduced the significance of some pathways. This finding suggests the importance of considering person-level variables when studying stepfamily relationships. Fourth, the sample we examined deserves attention in the literature; however, it is important not to generalize the findings beyond a low-income Black urban sample with a biologically unrelated MCP living in the family.

Fifth, our sample size was relatively small and limited the number of parameters that could be simultaneously examined in the model. Variables that were not examined, such as substance use by the mother or MCP and the role of the biological father, may have influenced the findings. Structural equation modeling is a large sample procedure, and although the sample size was sufficiently sized for estimation, caution is warranted when interpreting results using a relatively small sample and future studies should use larger samples to increase confidence in results. Sixth, there was a large percentage of missing data for MCP reported variables, which may have influenced the findings. Although we used state-of-the-field multiple imputation procedures (Schafer & Graham, 2002) to address missing data, caution should be used in interpreting the findings.

In regard to strengths, this is one of the first studies to assess MCP involvement in childrearing of adolescents. Second, the study assessed MCP involvement not only from the mother's perspective as in prior research (e.g., Bzostek, 2008) but from the perspectives of the MCP and the adolescent. Third, we focused on Black cohabiting stepfamilies living in an urban environment, many of whom face economic challenges. Understanding who lives in

these families and the roles they play in childrearing is important for developing effective prevention and, when warranted, intervention programs for children. Our findings suggest that MCPs appear to represent an important resource in these families. Consideration should be given to their inclusion into these programs as they are considered to be coparents, are actively involved in childrearing activities, and represent a strength in a cohabiting family structure.

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Figure 1.

Structural Model

Note: $X^2 (87, N = 121) = 145.78, p < .05$, RMSEA = .075, 95% CI .05–.10, CFI = .91, SRMR = .08. MCP = male cohabiting partner.

Table 1

Means for and Correlations Among Mother, Male Cohabiting Partner (MCP), and Adolescent Report of Mother and MCP Daily Child-Related Tasks and Setting Limits.

Variables		M (SD)		
Mother Daily Child-related Tasks			2	3
1	Mother Self-report	20.39 (6.63)	.54**	.63**
2	MCP Report	20.24 (5.80)	---	.58**
3	Adolescent Report	15.65 (6.77)		---
Mother Setting limits			5	6
4	Mother Self-report	10.61 (2.10)	.41**	.61**
5	MCP Report	10.27 (2.42)	--	.58**
6	Adolescent Report	10.07 (2.77)		--
MCP Daily Child-related Tasks			8	9
7	Mother Report	10.72 (7.68)	.46**	.56**
8	MCP Self-report	12.07 (6.66)	--	.49**
9	Adolescent Report	8.36 (6.37)		--
MCP Setting limits			11	12
10	Mother Report	5.46 (4.19)	.37**	.61**
11	MCP Self-report	5.89 (3.52)	--	.55**
12	Adolescent Report	5.03 (3.99)		--

Note: N=121; MCP = male cohabiting partner

Table 2

Summary of Model Paths

IFCT Outcome	β	S.E.	95% CI	<i>p</i>
Daily Child-related Tasks (DCT)				
Coparenting Conflict	.37	.09	.19 – .54	.001
Coparenting Support	.53	.12	.30 – .77	.001
Adolescent-MCP Relationship	.39	.16	.07 – .70	.02
Adolescent-Mother Relationship	-.06	.11	-.27 – .15	.56
Setting Limits (SL)				
Coparenting Conflict	.31	.11	.10 – .53	.004
Coparenting Support	.60	.12	.36 – .84	.001
Adolescent-MCP Relationship	.35	.16	.07 – .70	.026
Adolescent-Mother Relationship	-.05	.11	-.27 – .17	.66
Correlations Between Primary Variables				
Conflict with Support	.14	.14	-.13 – .42	.31
A-MCP Rel with Conflict	-.09	.12	-.32 – .13	.42
A-MCP Rel with Support	.52	.11	.31 – .73	.001
A-M Rel with Conflict	.04	.10	-.16 – .24	.71
A-M Rel with Support	.24	.12	.003 – .48	.047
A-M Rel with A-MCP Rel	.62	.05	.52 – .73	.001
DCT with LS	.31	.30	-.28 – .89	.31

Note: N=121; MCP = male cohabiting partner; A-MCP = adolescent and male cohabiting partner; A-M = adolescent and mother; DCT = daily child-rearing tasks; SL = setting limits