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Involvement in Childrearing and Firm Control Parenting by Male Cohabiting Partners in Black Low-income Stepfamilies: Forecasting Adolescent Problem Behaviors

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Abstract

Cohabitation is a family structure that is rapidly increasing in the United States. The current longitudinal study examined the interplay of involvement in a youth's daily activities and firm control parenting by male cohabiting partners (MCPs) on change in adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems. In a sample of 111 inner-city African American families, adolescents reported on involvement and parenting by MCPs at wave 1 and biological mothers reported on adolescent problem behaviors at waves 1 and 2. A significant interaction indicated that low involvement and low firm control by MCPs at wave 1 were associated with the highest level of internalizing problems at wave 2. An interaction did not emerge when externalizing problems served as the outcome. The findings indicate that male partners play an important role in parenting adolescents in cohabiting families and should be considered as potential participants in prevention and intervention programs.

Keywords

involvement; parenting; adolescents; Black cohabiting stepfamilies

Cohabitation with a non-biological parent is a family structure that many children are increasingly experiencing, especially Black children living in low income environments (Dunlap, Golub, & Benoit, 2010; Huang, Smock, Manning, & Bergstrom-Lynch, 2011; Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010). Unfortunately, this family form has been associated with

elevated levels of child problem behaviors when compared to children, particularly adolescents, living with two biological parents who are married (e.g., Brown, 2004; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Hofferth, 2006; Manning & Lamb, 2003) and, in some cases, those living with single mothers (Manning & Lamb, 2003). The role of the male cohabiting partner (MCP) in involvement in childrearing, parenting, and child psychosocial adjustment in these families has been a topic of interest and speculation in recent years (e.g., Dunlap et al., 2010; McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Of importance, research has begun to emerge over the last 15 years; however, consistent with the general trend for fathers to be ignored in the study of families (Phares, Fields, Kamboukos, & Lopez, 2005), stepfathers in cohabiting families have not received adequate attention.

The current study was designed to examine the association between two components of childrearing by an MCP – involvement in daily tasks with a stepchild and his use of firm control parenting– with adolescent problem behaviors. We focus on low income, inner-city Black stepfamilies for the following reasons: The high prevalence of cohabitation in these families; the unique associations of cohabitation and child outcomes which have emerged in Black families (e.g., Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002); the importance in the literature given to involvement and firm control parenting in these families (e.g., Bzostek, 2008; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002); and the challenges (e.g., economic, neighborhood violence, racial discrimination) impinging on adults living in these families that can disrupt daily routines and parenting skills (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Rienks, Wadsworth, Markman, Einhorn, & Etter, 2011), leading to child problem behaviors.

Does involvement and firm control parenting of an MCP make a difference in problem behaviors of children living in cohabiting families? A social control perspective suggests that the presence of an additional adult in the household can lead to better outcomes for children due to increased availability of parenting (see Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Manning & Lamb, 2003). However, a non-biological adult male in a married stepfamily is often only minimally involved in parenting and daily childrearing activities (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 2007). When MCPs are considered, their investment and involvement in daily activities with a stepchild and their parenting may be even less than married stepfathers: It has been hypothesized that they often are not fully integrated into the family with their primary role being a romantic partner to the single mother (e.g., Carlson & Berger, 2013; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Manning & Lamb, 2003). However, our recent quantitative and qualitative work (Forehand, Parent, Golub, & Reid, 2014; Reid, Golub, & Forehand, 2014) suggests that many male cohabiting partners are actively involved in daily childrearing activities and utilize parenting skills such as firm control. The current investigation tests the interplay of these two components of childrearing in predicting adolescent problem behaviors.

One component of responsible parenting by father figures is involvement in daily childrearing tasks (e.g., helping a child with homework, monitoring his/her bedtime) (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). Some research suggests that, at least for preschool age children, lack of involvement by cohabiting and married stepfathers is associated with problem behaviors of children [e.g., aggression; (Bzostek, 2008)]. Thus, participation in daily childrearing tasks by an MCP appears to be important for child outcome in

stepfamilies. Beyond involvement, behavioral control has long been viewed as providing the guidance and structure to deter problem behaviors of youth (see McKee, Jones, Forehand, & Cuellar, 2013, for a review), especially for those living in families in difficult conditions (Masten, 2001). Cohabitation can potentially enhance the effective use of this parenting skill as there is another adult to set and enforce rules (Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002). However, the research on second marriage families suggests that, at least initially, stepfathers should not set and enforce rules and limits, leaving this to the biological mother (see Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). And, this conclusion has been translated into popular advice for stepfamilies (e.g., Emery, 2012; Long & Forehand, 2002). However, the research, as well as its translation for stepfamilies, has not been conducted with those living under difficult conditions in cohabiting relationships. Thus, it is not clear whether firm control parenting by an MCP living in a stepfamily facing difficult conditions is beneficial or detrimental to a child's development (see Negreiros & Miller, 2014, for a discussion of this issue).

The influence of an MCP's parenting may be at least partially the result of the age of a child (Bzostek, 2008), suggesting the need to focus on a specific stage of development. Adolescence has long been identified as a difficult age to parent (Montemayor, 1986). Not surprisingly, but unfortunately, recent evidence suggests that stepfather involvement in childrearing decreases as children enter into and pass through adolescence (King, Ledwell, & Amato, 2014). As youth in this developmental period are vulnerable to both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (Zahn-Waxler, Shirtcliff, & Marceau, 2008), particularly when living in high risk environments (Masten, 2001), an MCP's involvement in childrearing and use of firm control parenting may be critical.

In the current study we focus on adolescent age youth and, as noted, examine the *interplay* of a non-biologically-related MCP's involvement in daily childrearing tasks and his use of behavioral control parenting in predicting adolescent behavior *change* across time. Our primary hypothesis is that, in contrast to other combinations of an MCP's involvement and control, lower levels of MCP firm control combined with lower levels of involvement will be associated with higher levels of adolescent problem behaviors. When there is neither involvement nor use of firm control, second-marriage stepfathers have been characterized as "polite strangers" in the family (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 2007), conferring little additional *parenting* benefits for a child. Similar findings may emerge when the stepfather is an MCP. On the other hand, drawing from the work of Hetherington et al. (1985) with remarried families, the combination of high involvement and high firm control from a non-biologically related MCP may be overbearing for an adolescent. Therefore, as a competing hypothesis, we examine if the combination of higher levels of both involvement and firm control is associated with higher levels of adolescent problem behavior than other combinations of an MCP's involvement and control. In essence, although the outcomes for adolescent problem behavior is different in the two hypotheses, in both we are proposing that it is dependent, in part, on the *interplay* of a MCP's involvement and firm control. We examine externalizing (e.g., aggression) and internalizing (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal, depression) problems of adolescents as involvement and firm control parenting can relate to both types of problem behaviors (McKee et al., 2013), including when MCPs are the focus of study (Bzostek, 2008).

The current study provides three important design features for examining the role of MCP's involvement and firm control parenting in adolescent problem behaviors. First, we utilized different informants for our independent and dependent variables: Adolescents report MCP involvement and firm control parenting and mothers report adolescent problem behaviors. Adolescents (Schwarz, Barton-Henry, & Pruzinsky, 1985) and mothers (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987) have a long history of reliably reporting on these variables. Second, we collected longitudinal data and examined the prediction of *change* in adolescent problem behavior across time, which allows conclusions to be reached that are more consistent with causality than previously reported cross-sectional data with cohabiting families (e.g., Manning & Lamb, 2003). Third, we control for mother's involvement and firm control in order to examine the *unique* effects of the MCP's involvement and firm control.

Method

Participants

Participants were 111 single-mother Black families with a male cohabiting partner (MCP) and a young adolescent living in New York City. The MCP was not married to the mother and was not biologically related to the adolescent.¹ The mean ages of participating youth, mothers, and MCPs were 13 years ($SD = 3.71$; 57.7% girls), 38.6 years ($SD = 7.61$), and 41.39 ($SD = 10.54$), respectively. Of the mothers, 37% did not complete high school, 33% completed high school/GED, and 30% had some college/vocational school after high school, respectively. Of the MCPs, 29% did not complete high school, 56% completed high school/GED, and 16% had some college/vocational school after high school, respectively. Household incomes averaged \$26,664 per year ($SD = \$29,724$). In all families at least one member identified as Black with 98% of the single mothers being Black. The mean number of children per family was 2.14 ($SD = 1.3$). Sixty percent of the mother-MCP relationships were "established" (lived together 13 months to 5 years at wave 1) and 40 % were "new" (lived together 12 months or less at wave 1).

In this paragraph we provide a description of important characteristics of the two primary participants in the study: The clinical status of the adolescents and the involvement in the household by MCPs. The adolescents in the current sample can be considered an at-risk, but not clinical, sample based on living in (a) an inner-city environment, (b) low income families, and (c) stepfamilies where the two residential adults are not married (see Brown, 2004; Hofferth, 2006). The MCPs in the current study were actively involved in parenting and daily childrearing activities (Forehand et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2014), particularly when mothers provided support for them engaging in these activities (Forehand, Parent, Golub, & Reid, in press).

¹This analysis excluded 25 families. In 12 families the father was the custodial parent at wave 1, in 3 families the child currently was living with the mother and the biological father, and in 10 families the adolescent was no longer living in the home at wave 2.

Procedure

The National Development and Research Institute (NDRI) Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the study. Participants initially signed consent (mother) and assent (adolescent) forms. Study participants were recruited 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. Both the mother and adolescent had to agree to participate. Families completed the assessment either at a community site or in their home, according to the preferences of each family.

At each of two waves of data collection separated by an average of 13 months, family members completed the assessments separately and privately with interviewers, who entered the responses into a computer database. Each interview took approximately 60 minutes to complete; mothers were compensated \$40 and adolescents were compensated \$20 for their participation.

Measures

Demographic Information—At wave 1, mothers responded to demographic questions about themselves (e.g., age, race, education), the MCP, their families (e.g., family income), and the length of their cohabitation with the MCP (established = greater than 12 months or new = 12 months or less). Youth reported on their gender and age.

Involvement in Childrearing Activities—The original “Who Does What?” questionnaire (WDW) (Cowan & Cowan, 1988) was designed to examine domestic tasks each member of a couple performed before and after having a child. 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. We adapted the WDW for the current project (see Forehand et al., 2014, for adaptations). The adaptations included a factor analysis of the 19 items for adolescents, resulting in the 7-item Daily Child-Related Tasks (DCT) scale (e.g., helping with homework, helping when adolescent has problems with siblings, friends, or teachers) used in this study. Each item was scored on a Never (0) to Very Often (4) scale. At wave 1, adolescents reported on MCP involvement and mother involvement on the DCT scale. Internal consistency was .83 and .81 for MCPs and mothers, respectively. Scores could range from 0 to 28 with higher scores indicating more involvement.

Firm Control Parenting—To measure firm control parenting, adolescents completed the Children’s Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (CRPBI; Schludermann & Schludermann, 1988) on the MCP and on the mother at wave 1. Adolescents indicated whether the MCP is “not like” (0), “somewhat like” (1), or “a lot like” (2) such statements as “my mother’s partner insists that I must do exactly as I am told”. A similar rating was completed by the adolescent about the mother. The original factor analysis of the measure yielded three factors, one of which was Firm Control vs. Lax Control. The CRPBI factors have been shown to be internally consistent, and convergent and discriminant validity has been

demonstrated in prior research with predominantly middle class White samples (see McKee et al., 2013, for a review). As the measure was not developed and validated for use with MCP and mother parenting in low-income Black families and as prior research (Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002) has indicated low alpha coefficients with similar samples for a firm control construct (.16 to .32 across years), we performed an exploratory factor analysis on the CRPBI. Five factors emerged with one of them being relevant for assessing firm control parenting. This 4-item factor (e.g., “____ sticks to a rule instead of allowing a lot of exceptions.”) had an alpha coefficient of .73 and .67 for MCPs and mothers, respectively. Scores could range from 0 to 8 for the scale with higher scores indicating more firm control.

Adolescent Problem Behavior—At waves 1 and 2, youth internalizing and externalizing problems were assessed by mother completion of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). The Anxious/Depressed, Withdrawn, and Somatic Complaints subscales were used to measure youth internalizing symptoms. Externalizing problems were examined using the Aggression and Rule Breaking subscales. Reliability and validity of the CBCL is well-established for the internalizing and externalizing dimensions (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). In the current study, the alpha coefficients for the CBCL were .85 and .87 for internalizing problems and .91 and .94 for externalizing problems at waves 1 and 2, respectively.

Data Analytic Plan

Missing Data—There were no missing data for mother report of adolescent problem behavior at wave 1, 6.3% missing for adolescent report of MCP firm control parenting and involvement at wave 1, and 11.7% missing for mother report of adolescent problem behavior at wave 2. Little’s Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test (Little, 1988) was conducted for all main study variables with missing data at wave 1 and wave 2 and was non-significant ($X^2(27) = 34.86, p > .10$), suggesting that the data are missing completely at random (MCAR). Therefore, missing data were treated as ignorable (missing completely at random) and full information maximum likelihood estimation techniques were used for inclusion of all available data.

Preliminary Analyses of Study and Demographic Variables—Correlations of MCP involvement and firm control at wave 1 with adolescent problem behaviors at wave 2 were conducted to examine the individual relationships between the independent and dependent variables. In addition, to determine which demographic variables to control in subsequent analyses, correlations for continuous variables (e.g., adolescent age) and analyses of variance with categorical variables (e.g., adolescent gender) were conducted with both adolescent externalizing and internalizing problems. Correlations of mother involvement and firm control with adolescent outcomes also were computed. Finally, a correlation was computed for (a) length of cohabitation and (b) length of time between assessments (waves 1 and 2) with both dependent variables.

Primary Analyses—Path analyses to test the interaction of wave 1 MCP involvement and firm control parenting predicting wave 2 adolescent problem behaviors were conducted with Mplus 6.0 software (Muthen & Muthen, 2010). To account for non-normally distributed

data, maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors (MLR) was used. The following fit statistics were employed to evaluate model fit: Chi-square (χ^2 : $p > .05$ excellent), Comparative Fit Index (CFI; $> .90$ acceptable, $> .95$ excellent), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; $< .08$ acceptable, $< .05$ excellent) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR; $< .08$ acceptable, $< .05$ excellent) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). MCP involvement and firm control were mean centered prior to calculating their product in order to facilitate interpretation of effects. Wave 1 internalizing or externalizing problems served as the covariate to account for change over time in the dependent variable. Wave 1 mother involvement and firm control also served as covariates in order to examine the unique effects of MCP involvement and firm control. Results are presented first for internalizing problems as the outcome and then for externalizing problems as the outcome. Visual representations of any significant interactions are presented by plotting the mean value among participants scoring one standard deviation above and/or below the mean on parenting and involvement, consistent with the recommendations of Cohen and Cohen (1983). Furthermore, significant interactions were decomposed by computing simple slopes at low (-1 SD) and high ($+1$ SD) levels of the moderators (Aiken & West, 1991).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among main study variables are presented in Table 1. Adolescent internalizing and externalizing problems within and across waves 1 and 2 correlated significantly and in the expected direction with each other. MCP involvement was significantly correlated with MCP firm control parenting such that more involvement was related to more firm control parenting. A similar significant correlation emerged between mother involvement and mother firm control. No significant correlations emerged between MCP or mother firm control parenting or involvement and adolescent problem behaviors. In terms of control variables, neither adolescent internalizing nor externalizing problems at wave 2 was related to any of the demographic or control variables tested (i.e., mother age, MCP age, mother education, MCP education, family income, child gender, child age, length of cohabitation, number of months between waves 1 and 2). Thus, beyond the measure of the wave 1 outcome variable (internalizing or externalizing problems) and maternal involvement and firm control, no other covariates were included in subsequent models. Although not significant in correlational analyses, maternal involvement and firm control were included to examine the unique contribution of the MCP's involvement and firm control.

Primary Analyses

The proposed model for internalizing problems demonstrated excellent fit (χ^2 (11, $N = 111$) = 11.34, $p > .15$, RMSEA = .02, 95% CI .00 – .10, CFI = .99, SRMR = .046). When wave 2 internalizing problems served as the outcome, wave 1 internalizing problems ($\beta = .50$, 95% CI .32 – .69, $p < .001$) and the interaction of involvement by firm control ($\beta = .18$, 95% CI .02 – .34, $p < .05$), but not the conditional effects for MCP involvement ($\beta = -.16$, 95% CI $-.39$ – .07), mother involvement ($\beta = .03$, 95% CI $-.13$ – .20), MCP firm control ($\beta = -.06$,

95% CI $-.21 - .10$), or mother firm control ($\beta = -.03$, 95% CI $-.26 - .20$), predicted wave 2 internalizing problems. Figure 1 illustrates the form of the interaction by depicting the regression lines of the relation between MCP involvement and youth internalizing problems at high and low ($+1$ SD, -1 SD) scores of MCP firm control (Aiken & West, 1991). As is evident in Figure 1, the form of the interaction indicates that, consistent with the “polite stranger” hypothesis, wave 1 low MCP involvement and wave 1 low firm control parenting is associated with the highest levels of wave 2 internalizing problems relative to any other combination. Probing the interaction and testing simple slopes further supports this interpretation with the conditional effect of MCP involvement on youth internalizing problems being significant at low, but not high, levels of firm control ($p < .05$). Finally, although the proposed model for externalizing problems demonstrated excellent fit, no significant effects emerged when wave 2 externalizing problems served as the outcome other than wave 1 externalizing problems.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the interplay of a non-biologically-related MCP’s involvement in daily childrearing activities and his use of firm control parenting practices on changes in adolescent problem behaviors. Lower levels of both MCP involvement and firm control, but not higher levels of both of these behaviors, were associated with more subsequent internalizing problems than other combinations, particularly low firm control and high involvement parenting. The interaction of involvement by firm control parenting was not related to adolescent externalizing problems.

Congruent with a social control perspective, an MCP is influential on an adolescent’s psychosocial adjustment: When an MCP is a “polite stranger” in the household in terms of parenting (i.e., neither involved in daily child rearing activities nor has consistent rules), an adolescent a year later has the highest level of internalizing problems. This finding suggests that, for Black families living under difficult conditions, an actively parenting MCP can confer benefits for an adolescent. However, inconsistent with early research with middle class White remarried families (Hetherington et al., 1985) and more recent recommendations applied to these types of stepfamilies (e.g., Emery, 2012), being highly involved *and* exhibiting firm control parenting practices (i.e., “overbearing stepparent”) did not predict higher levels of adolescent internalizing problems. Our findings indicate that an MCP in a Black low-income cohabiting family with an adolescent should be encouraged to help with daily childrearing activities and/or with setting and enforcing rules in the home.

Why would a MCP’s parenting be related to internalizing, but not externalizing, problems of an adolescent? The absence of structure, particularly for youth living in high risk environments, has been associated with internalizing problems (McKee et al., 2013). Alternatively, parental overcontrol also has been associated with youth internalizing problems (Drake & Ginsburg, 2012; Neigreiros & Miller, 2014). And, of relevance, the two dimensions of overcontrol that account for the most variance in internalizing problems (i.e., anxiety symptoms) are overinvolvement and failure to grant autonomy (i.e., excessive levels of firm control; Drake & Ginsburg, 2012; McLeod, Wood & Weisz, 2007). In contrast, while firm control has been related to externalizing problems (McKee et al., 2013), other

dimensions of parenting (e.g., harsh and coercive parenting, monitoring of activities outside the home), rather than involvement, have been identified for these types of problems (Dishion & McMahon, 1998; Granic & Patterson, 2006; McKee et al., 2013). Thus, our differential findings for internalizing versus externalizing problems may result from the types of MCP parenting practices we examined.

Our findings should be considered in the context of the limitations and strengths of the current study. In terms of limitations, our construct of firm control parenting consisted only of four items from a larger scale. Our difficulty in assessing this construct in a high-risk sample is not unique (e.g., Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002), suggesting that this dimension of parenting may require reconceptualization or use of different measurement strategies in inner-city, economically challenged Black families. Second, it is important to note that the mean levels of involvement and firm control were below the midpoint of the scales. Studying MCPs with more extreme high and low scores may have yielded different results. Third, although we considered length of cohabitation, we dichotomized this measure (greater than/equal to or less than 12 months) because of the difficulty of mothers specifying the exact length. We did not find that length of cohabitation was associated with our outcome measures; however, different findings may have emerged with a continuous measure. In addition, future research with larger samples should examine if length of cohabitation further moderates the involvement by firm control interaction found in the current study. Fourth, the focus of this study was only on two parenting variables: involvement and firm control. Other parenting variables (e.g., positive reinforcement, warmth) may be important to consider in future research. Such research also could include the collection of not only questionnaire data but observations of MCP-adolescent interactions. Both adaptive and coercive parenting then could be assessed, which would inform prevention and intervention programs (see final paragraph). Furthermore, beyond parenting, MCPs may confer other benefits for adolescents (e.g., financial support to the family). Finally, it is important to note that we restricted our sample to not only families living in difficult conditions, but to ones with an adolescent age child. Similar findings may not emerge with younger children or with families living under different environmental conditions.

The strengths of the current study included its longitudinal design, using different informants for the dependent and independent variables, and controlling for maternal parenting to examine the unique effects of MCP parenting. To our knowledge, this is the first study to utilize these design features to predict change in adolescent problem behaviors in an emerging, but understudied, family structure: cohabiting stepfamilies.

The findings have important implications for prevention and intervention programs. Many of these programs focus on teaching parenting skills (see Forehand, Lafko, Parent & Burt, 2014) to prevent or reduce child and adolescent problem behaviors. As our findings indicate that an MCP's parenting is important in forecasting problem behavior of an adolescent living in the home, these men should be encouraged to participate in parenting prevention or intervention programs with biological mothers. Furthermore, within these programs, MCPs should be encouraged to take an active role in parenting, specifically in helping the mother with daily routines and setting limits.

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Figure 1.
MCP Involvement by MCP Firm Control Parenting at Wave 1 Predicting Adolescent Internalizing Problems at Wave 2.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among independent and dependent variables.

Variable	Mean (S.D.)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Internalizing (W1)	4.9 (4.7)	.57**	-.02	.00	.02	-.03	.40**	.35**
2. Externalizing (W1)	9.6 (8.6)	--	-.07	.06	-.07	.13	.47**	.60**
3. MCP Involvement (W1)	8.7 (6.5)		--	.54**	.53**	.31**	-.04	-.06
4. MCP Firm Control (W1)	3.5 (2.4)			--	.19*	.49**	-.11	-.04
5. Mother Involvement (W1)	14.9 (7.0)				--	.29*	-.03	-.11
6. Mother Firm Control (W1)	5.6 (1.9)					--	.15	-.08
7. Internalizing (W2)	4.6 (5.8)						--	.76**
8. Externalizing (W2)	7.7 (10.2)							--

Note:

** = $p < .01$; W1 = Wave 1; W2 = Wave 2