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# Parenting Across Racial and Class Lines: Assortative Mating Patterns of New Parents Who Are Married, Cohabiting, Dating or No Longer Romantically Involved

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## *Abstract*

*We examine the assortative mating patterns of new parents who are married, cohabiting, romantically involved and no longer romantically involved. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, we find that relationship status at the time of a birth depends mainly on father's race rather than on whether mother and father's race/ethnicity differ. Crossing race/ethnic lines does not appear to have much effect on relationship transitions following a birth. Rather, parents are less likely to marry after a birth if one parent is black, and the relationships of Hispanic couples are particularly stable. Crossing educational lines has little effect on relationship status at birth, but same-education couples had a slightly lower risk of divorce following the birth.*

## **Introduction**

Intermarriage patterns are a classic measure of social distance between ethnic and racial groups as well as a classic indicator of the assimilation of social groups (Kalmijn 1998, Merton 1941). Patterns of assortative mating with respect to socioeconomic characteristics have also been of interest because of what they reveal about the evolution of the institution of marriage and gender roles and because of their implications for our stratification system (Mare 1991). Married couples, however, represent a shrinking share both of American couples in general and of couples having children. Recently, the study of assortative patterns of marriage has been extended to include cohabiting couples (Blackwell and Lichter 2000, 2004; Garfinkel, Glei and McLanahan 2002; Schoen and Weinick 1993). These recent studies have used the degree of homogamy to understand some of the differences and similarities between marriage and cohabitation as social institutions.

In this article we expand the focus of assortative pairing from co-resident couples to all parents of newly-born children. Taking advantage of the new data on the parents of a recent birth cohort from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, we are able to look at the assortative pairings of mothers and

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fathers who are (1) married, (2) cohabiting, (3) romantically involved but not living together, and (4) no longer romantically involved. The Fragile Families study took place in 20 U.S. cities and oversampled births to unmarried parents, allowing for an analysis of assortative pairing among a relatively low-income and racially diverse population.

By focusing on a study of new parents, we are limiting our analysis to the assortative pairings of couples who have children together. However, the assortative patterns of parents are of particular importance because of their consequences for the transmission of inequality and the composition of the next generation. The rapid increase in multiracial children makes this population of particular interest. Additionally, the study's overrepresentation of low-income parents provides an opportunity to explore patterns of couple formation and disruption in the context of the disappearance of men's advantage in educational attainment and the general decline in the earnings capacity of working class men relative to women (DiPrete and Buchmann 2006, Jacobs 1996, Wilson 1996).

In addition to looking at a wider variety of relationships, the Fragile Families study enables us to follow couples longitudinally to observe the way in which relationships that cross racial and class lines evolve over time. Do such differences appear to discourage marriage? Do they increase the chance that the couple will break up? This longitudinal dimension has sometimes been studied in the context of marriage and divorce, but this study is the first to look at longitudinal transitions among a broader set of relationship types.

## **Prior Research**

The large literature on assortative marriage patterns in the United States has been interested in interracial marriage as a measure of social distance between racial groups, in the exchange of racial for educational and occupational status, and in the evolution of educational homogamy over time (Kalmijn 1993, 1998; Mare 1991; Merton 1941; Qian 1997).

Almost four decades have elapsed since the legal prohibition against interracial marriage was abolished, yet marriages between whites and African Americans remain uncommon, indicating the persistence of social distance between these groups (Jacobs and Labov 2002; Kalmijn 1993, 1998; Qian 1997). Using intermarriage as a measure of social distance, some research has found that the gulf between Mexican Americans and African Americans is similar to that between whites and African Americans, and that less distance exists between whites and Mexican Americans (Rosenfeld 2002).

In recent decades, women's educational attainment has caught up with and even surpassed men's, leading to new patterns of assortative mating in terms of education (Jacobs 1996, Mare 1995). Marriages and cohabitation in which the woman is better educated than the man are now more common than relationships in which the woman has less education than her male partner (Qian 1998). A great deal of research has found a strong positive relationship between men's earnings capacity and marriage (Bennett, Bloom and Craig 1989; Lichter et al. 1992; Sweeney 2002; Wilson 1987, 1996). At the same time, recent literature has suggested that women's earning potential has become increasingly attractive to

male partners (Kalmijn 1998, Oppenheimer 1988, Sweeney and Cancian 2004). Therefore, it is possible either that male educational advantages continue to facilitate marriage or that a couple's collective human capital resources is more important (Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan 2005; Kalmijn 1998; Mare 1991).

Building upon the research on racial and educational assortative mating, recent research has examined assortative mating patterns as a way to reveal underlying differences between the institutions of marriage and cohabitation. Schoen and Weinick (1993) found that married couples in the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) were more likely to be close in age and religion but somewhat less likely to have the same educational attainment than were cohabiting couples. They concluded that this supported the idea that cohabitation and marriage were *distinct institutions*. In particular, cohabitation was seen to be a "looser bond" than marriage in which economic characteristics were more important than social and cultural characteristics.

The NSFH sample size did not allow Schoen and Weinick an in-depth look at interracial couples. Blackwell and Lichter (2000) used the 1990 Census to obtain racial and educational characteristics on nearly half a million couples. They used log-linear models to describe educational and racial assortative patterns of married and cohabiting couples. Blackwell and Lichter found that although racial homogamy was very strong for both married and cohabiting couples, it was even stronger for married couples. Unlike Schoen and Weinick, they did not find that educational homogamy was stronger for cohabitators than for married couples. Blackwell and Lichter did find that women were more likely to "marry up" in education than they were to "cohabit up."

Whereas Schoen and Weinick emphasized the competing institutional nature of marriage and cohabitation, Blackwell and Lichter argued that the differences in homogamy between marriages and cohabitations were probably due in large part to the differential selection of couples out of cohabitation into marriage. Couples that "fit" together better were more likely to marry. In a subsequent article, Blackwell and Lichter (2004) found limited support for this "winnowing hypothesis." Using the National Survey of Family Growth, Blackwell and Lichter (2004) found slightly more homogamy in marital relationships than in cohabiting or dating relationships, but also found substantial education, racial and religious homogamy among dating and cohabiting couples.

The winnowing hypothesis is particularly valuable in our study of Fragile Families, in which the current status and evolution of couples can be seen as a chain of selective transitions. The framework we envision is one in which simultaneous and sequential decisions are being made based on a combination of factors involving partner's characteristics, relationship type, the decision to conceive a child and bring it to term, the decision to change relationship types between conception and birth, and the decision to change relationship types following the birth of the child. It is clear that the relationships are not simple. For example, partner preferences might initially be based on preferences for relationship type, but relationship type preferences are surely also a function of the partner that one is able to find. Similarly, the decision to conceive a child must depend in part on who one is partnered with and what kind of relationship

one has with that partner. There is also a large element of chance in conception, and in some cases it is the pregnancy that influences relationship type as much if not more than the relationship type influences the decision to conceive and carry to term.

Our article departs from most prior research by focusing on parents. We are aware of one other study that analyzed assortative mating patterns of parents in particular. Garfinkel, Gleib and McLanahan (2002) used the National Survey of Family Growth to compare assortative mating patterns of married and unmarried parents with the aim of estimating the ability of unmarried fathers to pay child support. They find that unmarried parents are less homogamous with respect to education and race than married parents are. They also find that educational heterogamy is associated with instability of marital and non-marital relationships. Their study focuses on three groups of parents: married, cohabiting and not cohabiting; and their analysis focuses on the percent of parents marrying within racial or ethnic group and the mean differences in parents' educational attainment and age. Our study departs from theirs by focusing on parents of a recent birth cohort, including longitudinal analyses, looking at partnering up or down in education rather than mean differences, and providing more detail on the relationship between particular racial and ethnic pairings and relationship status. Nevertheless, our findings are broadly consistent with theirs.

Based on prior research, we derive the following set of questions that motivate our analysis:

1. Are married parents more assortative than unmarried parents? If cohabitation is a substitute for marriage, then we might expect not. In particular, it may well be that some of the differences observed in past studies between the assortative pairing of married and cohabiting couples are due to intentions about childbearing. In a sense, our sample of new parents controls for this difference since all of the couples have chosen to have a child. Alternatively, it may be that differences between partners are an obstacle to marriage, and more generally may discourage more serious relationships if we view the categorization of relationships as ordered from marriage (the most serious) to not romantically involved (the least serious). If this were the case then we might expect progressively more heterogamy as we move toward less serious relationships.

2. Are some racial or ethnic differences more salient than others? Because of the relatively high proportion of interracial couples in the Fragile Families sample, we have a chance to see if the major color line is between black and non-black, white and non-white, or Hispanic and non-Hispanic parents.

3. For new parents, do traditional sex roles in which the father is more educated than the mother encourage marriage and relationship stability? This question will be increasingly important in the future, as women (particularly African-American women) have higher educational attainment than their male counterparts. Alternatively, some research suggests that, at least for cohabitators, similarities in educational attainment may encourage relationship stability and that women's educational advantage may have a destabilizing effect on relationships (Brines and Joyner 1999).

4. Is the effect of assortative characteristics symmetric for entry into marriage and for disruption? We would hypothesize that educational differences might have a larger effect on disruption than on entry into marriage, especially when contrasted with racial differences. This is because racial differences are strongly sanctioned against at the time of marriage, whereas challenges stemming from educational differences may emerge with time.

## Data and Methods

The data for this article come from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study. Fragile Families is a longitudinal study that follows a birth cohort of approximately 3,700 children born to unmarried parents with a comparison sample of 1,200 children born to married parents. The unmarried sample is representative of non-marital births in large cities. Focusing on urban areas allows us to gain unusual detail on the lives of poor and minority parents. About 35 percent of the sample received welfare or food stamps in the year before the birth, 62 percent of births were covered by Medicaid, and almost 80 percent of the sample is non-white. In our analyses, we apply weights to adjust for the oversampling of non-marital births in the Fragile Families study.<sup>1</sup>

Baseline interviews with mothers were completed in the hospital shortly after the birth. Fathers were also interviewed soon after the birth, either at the hospital or as soon as possible thereafter. Contacting parents soon after the birth of their child produced a relatively high response rate for fathers, even those who were not married to the mothers. Baseline interviews with fathers were completed for 89 percent of married couples, 90 percent of cohabiting couples, 73 percent of romantic couples, and 40 percent of not involved couples. Baseline interviews provide data on mother and father's race, ethnicity and educational attainment. When father interviews were not available, we relied upon mother's reports of father's race, ethnicity and educational attainment. Follow-up interviews were administered at 12 and 30 months after the birth. We rely on mother reports of relationship status at the 30-month follow-up in our longitudinal analysis. The longitudinal analysis includes a smaller sample than the baseline analysis because of attrition. The response rate to the 30-month survey was 86 percent.

Parents' race and ethnicity were based on two questions on the baseline survey: "Which of these categories best describes your race?" and "Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin or descent?" On the initial question, respondents were permitted to mark only one category. We classified parents into three racial/ethnic groups: Black (non-Hispanic), Hispanic and White (non-Hispanic).<sup>2</sup> Other racial and ethnic groups were not sufficiently large to analyze. Parents were grouped into four educational categories: less than high school, high school only, some college, and college graduate – all based on reports on the baseline survey.

The dependent variables in our analysis are measures of relationship status at different points in time based on mother reports. We analyze the relationship between parent's characteristics and their relationship status at the time of birth (baseline) and at the 30-month follow-up. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the dependent variables of interest: parents' relationship at birth and relationship at 30 months. As shown, about half of parents were married at birth, about one-quarter were cohabiting, and the other quarter were either dating or not romantically involved. Between baseline and 30 months, some marriages ended and some new marriages formed. At the 30-month follow-up point, 53 percent of parents were married, 27 percent were not romantically involved, and the remainder were cohabiting or dating. Our analysis focuses on the parental relationship and does not consider marriages to new partners, which were relatively infrequent. About 2 percent of mothers married a new partner and 10 percent were living with a new partner at the follow-up. These mothers are included in the category indicating that the parents were not romantically involved.

Our analysis examines whether parents' individual and joint characteristics help to explain variations in relationships at birth and in relationship transitions between baseline and 30 months. We use descriptive distributions and multinomial logistic regression to analyze parents' relationship status at the time of birth. For our longitudinal analysis, we use logistic regression models to analyze relationship transitions between birth and the 30-month follow-up. We analyze three relationship transitions between birth and 30 months: from cohabiting or romantically involved to married, from cohabiting or romantically involved to not romantically involved, and from married to no longer married.

Table 1 also contains descriptive statistics on parents' individual and joint race and education characteristics. About 90 percent of couples were racially homogenous, i.e., the mother and father self-reported belonging to the same race/ethnic group. The other 10 percent of couples had crossed race/ethnic lines in their relationships. Parents were much more likely to differ in their educational attainment than they were in their race/ethnicity. More than half of couples consisted of mothers and fathers with similar levels of educational attainment. When parents' educational attainment differed, mothers were more likely to have the higher level of education: fathers had more education in 20 percent of couples and mothers had more education in 27 percent of couples.

In our baseline and longitudinal analyses, we incorporate a series of control variables that may be related both to the assortative race/class pairing of parents and to parents' relationship outcomes. Not all parents in our sample were first-time parents, so we control for whether parents had previous children together

**Table 1: Sample Characteristics**

	Percentage (weighted)
<i>Dependent Variables</i>	
Parents' relationship at birth	
Married	52.0
Cohabiting	24.8
Romantically involved	17.4
Not romantically involved	5.8
Selected relationships at 30 months	
Married	53.4
Not romantically involved	27.1
<i>Independent Variables</i>	
Mother is Black	40.5
Mother is Hispanic	32.0
Mother is White	27.5
Father is Black	41.2
Father is Hispanic	33.3
Father is White	25.5
Couple is racially homogamous	90.3
Mother less than high school	27.0
Mother high school	24.2
Mother some college	28.0
Mother college degree	20.7
Father less than high school	28.3
Father high school	28.4
Father some college	25.6
Father college degree	17.8
Couple is educationally homogamous	52.6
Father has more education	20.4
Mother has more education	27.1
<i>Control Variables</i>	
Parents have previous children together	46.4
Mom has child with another partner	26.3
Dad has child with another partner	29.1
Mom worked last year	69.4
Dad worked last week	83.0
Birth was twins	1.8
Mother was previously married	10.0
Mother age 14-19 years	10.5
Mother age 20-24 years	28.1
Mother age 25-29 years	25.9
Mother age 30-34 years	21.2
Mother age 35 plus years	14.2
Mother older than father by 5 years or more	4.0
Father older than mother by 5 years or more	27.6
Father older than mother by 10 years or more	7.7

Notes: n = 4373. Percentages are weighted to correct for the undersampling of marital births in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study.



and for whether parents had children with other partners. It is also worth noting that about 25 percent of our sample had subsequent children during the 30-month follow-up, which could be both a cause and effect of parents' relationship status. Because of the endogeneity of subsequent children with respect to relationship status, we do not include subsequent fertility as a control variable. We do include additional control variables, displayed in Table 1, for mother and father's employment, twin births, previous marriage by mother, mother's age group and the difference between the parents' ages.

For the analysis of how racial/ethnic assortative pairing affects relationship status at birth and 30 months later, we estimate predicted probabilities of relationship status for couples with each possible combination of mother and father's race/ethnicity. These predicted probabilities are estimated for a hypothetical couple with the following modal characteristics: both parents have a high school degree and no further education, mother and father are first-time parents, mother did not give birth to twins, mother has not been previously married, mother was employed in the year prior to the baby's birth, father was employed in the week prior to the baby's birth, mother is between 20 and 24 years old, and father is within five years of mother's age. Fixing the control variables at their modal values allows us to estimate the effects of race/ethnic pairings on relationships net of potential confounding characteristics such as parents' age, education or employment.

For the analysis of how educational assortative pairing affects relationships, we estimate predicted probabilities of relationship status for couples with each possible combination of the mother and father's educational attainment group. These predicted probabilities are estimated for a hypothetical couple similar to the couple described above except that mother and father's race is held constant at white and educational characteristics are allowed to vary at their observed values.

## **Analysis and Results**

### ***Assortative Pairing of Parents at the Time of Birth***

#### ***Racial Homogamy***

Figure 1 shows the distribution of relationship type at the time of the birth by the race of the father and the mother. The bars represent the predicted probabilities of marriage, cohabitation, romantic involvement and being split up, holding constant everything but race. Predicted probabilities are estimated using a multinomial logistic regression model that predicts relationship type as a function of mother and father's race, the interaction of mother and father's race, and the control variables.<sup>3</sup> We focus on the predicted probabilities rather than the observed proportions, because we are interested in the effects of parents' race on relationship status net of potential confounding variables.

The diagonal panels of Figure 1 show the distributions of relationship status for homogamous white, black, and Hispanic couples. The modal relationship at time of birth differs by race: married for white couples, romantically involved for black couples, and cohabiting for Hispanic couples.

Next, we consider whether parents' relationship status is affected when

parents partner with someone from a different race/ethnic group. The figure suggests that, from the mothers' perspective, crossing race or ethnic lines has a large effect on the relationship with father at the time of birth. For white mothers, crossing race/ethnic lines reduces the seriousness of relationship with father at birth. For black mothers, crossing race/ethnic lines increases the seriousness of relationship with father at birth. For Hispanic mothers, crossing race/ethnic lines increases the seriousness of the relationship if the father is white and decreases the seriousness of the relationship if the father is black.

We see a very different pattern of results when we take the fathers' perspective. For fathers, crossing race/ethnic lines does not have much effect on the seriousness of relationship with mother at birth. The distribution of relationships for white fathers with white mothers is similar to the distribution for white fathers with Hispanic mothers. (Although the distribution for white fathers with black mothers looks much different, this group only consists of 20 couples and is too small to provide reliable estimates.) For black and Hispanic fathers, the distribution of relationship types is roughly similar whether mothers are white, black or Hispanic.

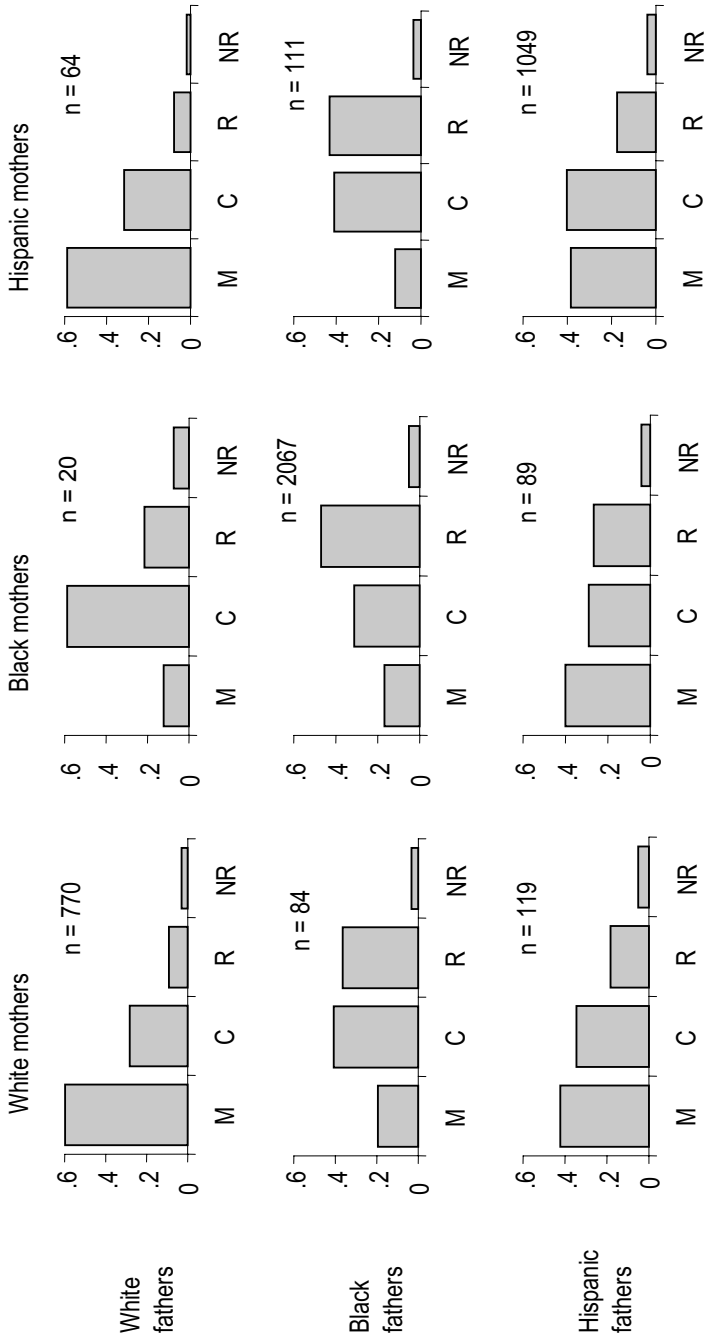
The figure suggests that relationship status at baseline depends mainly on father's race rather than on whether mother and father's race/ethnicity differs. We conducted statistical tests to determine whether a model with father's race/ethnicity-only fit the data as well as a model with the full set of main effects and interaction terms for mother and father's race/ethnicity. Goodness of fit tests found that there is no statistically significant pattern beyond fathers' race with the exception of the father white and mother black category, a category for which we have so few observations that we are reluctant to generalize.

Our findings help explain those of Garfinkel, Gleib and McLanahan (2002), who found that white mothers were less likely to be with white fathers when they were cohabiting than when they were married. Garfinkel, Gleib and McLanahan (2002) did not find a statistically significant difference in homogamy between married and unmarried Hispanic or black mothers. Our findings suggest that for Hispanic mothers this may conceal offsetting effects: Hispanic mothers married less when they had children with black fathers, but married more when they had children with white fathers. There may also have been offsetting effects for black mothers, but the small sample size for the black mothers with white fathers makes it difficult to draw a firm conclusion.

Our findings differ somewhat from Blackwell and Lichter's analysis (2000) of homogamy parameters. Like us, they found that the tendency of whites to have a same-race partner was stronger for those who married than those who cohabited. However, they also found greater homogamy among married than cohabiting blacks. This consistency allows them to conclude that "cohabiting couples are significantly less racially endogamous than married ones." (Blackwell and Lichter 2000:286) Our analysis, however, suggests that this is not generally true for new parents. Indeed, for fathers, the race/ethnicity of their partner has no apparent influence on relationship status.

The difference between Blackwell and Lichter's analysis and ours is not simply that we are dealing with parents as opposed to couples in general, but also

Figure 1. Parents' Relationship Distribution at Time of Baby's Birth by Race of Mother and Father



Note: M = married, C = cohabiting, R = romantically involved, and NR = not romantically involved. Bars are predicted proportions by parents' race/ethnic pairings with mother and father's education fixed at high school and covariates fixed at their modal values. Caution should be used in interpreting the distribution for cells less than n = 50.

because our approach has a different underlying theoretical model. When we use their method and estimate homogamy parameters for the Fragile Families population, we also find more homogamy for blacks who marry than for blacks who were in less serious relationships. The interpretation of results thus depends on whether one relies on homogamy parameters or the predicted probabilities of same-race unions. The homogamy models control for the relationship-specific marginal distributions of race, implicitly assuming that individuals are sorted into relationship types even before they have found a partner. The behavioral model we have in mind, on the other hand, is one in which relationship type is at least in part determined by whom one finds as a partner. We thus view the relationship type as a dependent variable driven in part by homogamy, as opposed to the log-linear models used by Blackwell and Lichter, which allow homogamy estimates to be driven by the racial composition of those in each relationship type.

### *Educational Assorting*

Next, we examine how partnering patterns by education differ by relationship type. In particular, we are interested in whether different educational attainment levels are an obstacle to couples forming stronger relationships. We conducted a similar analysis using income categories of mothers and fathers, which yielded consistent findings. Because of the consistency in income and education results, we present only the results of our education analysis.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of relationship types by education of the mother and father. The clearest pattern is that the proportions marrying increase as the educational attainment of either the mother or the father increases, which can be seen as we move from the upper left to lower right of the figure. At lower educational levels of mother and father, cohabitation is as common as marriage. At higher educational levels marriage is almost universal.

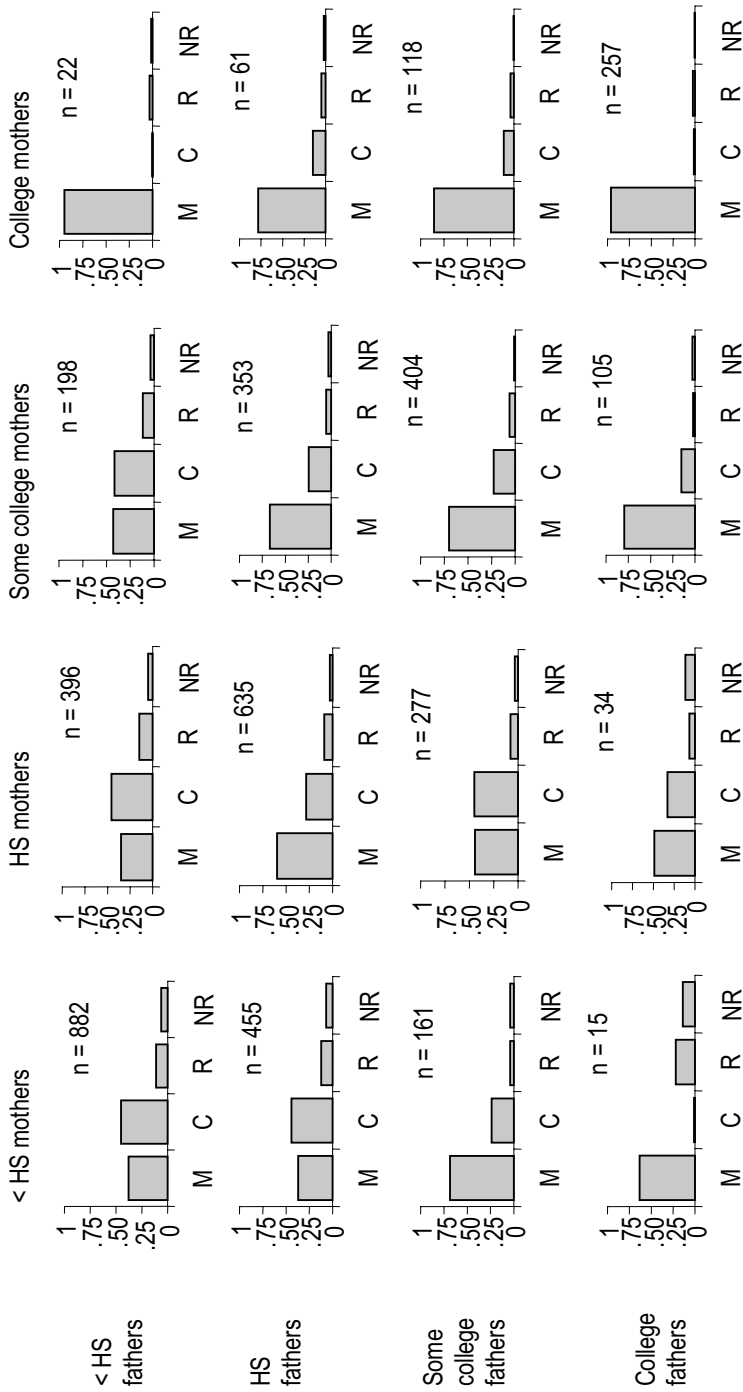
By graphing all of the educational combinations we can also see that the diagonal does not stand out in any way. This means that there is no obvious interaction between mother and father's educational attainment. Looking off the diagonals we see further that the effect of mother's and father's education is largely symmetric. In particular, we see that when father's education is higher than mother's it does not tend to make the relationships more serious than when mother's education is higher than fathers. In fact, marriage is more common when mother has some college or a college degree and father has a high school degree than when the father has the equivalent education advantage.

### **Longitudinal Results**

Our longitudinal analysis examines whether couples with similar characteristics are more likely to marry and less likely to break up than couples whose characteristics are dissimilar and determines which differences represent the greatest impediment to relationships.

We begin by analyzing transitions to marriage or to splitting up among couples who were cohabiting or romantically involved at birth. We exclude parents who were no longer romantically involved at the time of birth from those at risk of

Figure 2. Parents' Relationship Distribution at Time of Baby's Birth by Education of Mother and Father



Note: M = married, C = cohabiting, R = romantically involved, and NR = not romantically involved. Bars are predicted proportions by parents' education pairings with mother and father's race fixed at White and covariates fixed at their modal values. Caution should be used in interpreting the distribution for cells less than n = 50.

marriage or relationship dissolution. We use logistic regression models in which we regress married at follow-up (or split up at follow-up) on parents' individual and joint race/ethnic and education characteristics and an array of control variables. Then, we analyze transitions to splitting up among couples that were married when their babies were born. For the married sample, we regress split up at follow-up on parents' individual and joint race/ethnic and education characteristics and control variables.

Prior research has shown that parents' individual race and class attributes have a large influence on whether they marry or separate following a non-marital birth (Carlson, McLanahan and England 2004; Harknett and McLanahan 2004). Because the main focus of our analysis is on the effects of parents' joint characteristics, we do not discuss in detail the effects of individual race and class characteristics or display these results in tables. However, consistent with the analysis of relationship at the time of birth, being white or Hispanic and having a college education were associated with marriage and staying together, whereas being black or having lower educational attainment were associated with remaining unmarried or breaking up.

### *Racial Homogamy*

Table 2 shows the association between racial homogamy and relationship transitions between birth and 30 months. The first panel of Table 2 shows the predicted probability of marriage at follow-up for couples that were cohabiting or romantically involved at baseline. The rows represent six possible racial/ethnic pairings: homogamous black, Hispanic and white couples, and heterogamous couples consisting of one black and one Hispanic parent, one black and one white parent, and one Hispanic and one white parent. The tables do not make distinctions based on mother as opposed to father's race or ethnicity, because separate analyses determined that the effects of crossing racial or ethnic lines were largely symmetric with respect to gender in the period following the baby's birth. Although father's race seemed to dominate in affecting relationship status at the time of the birth, this no longer seemed to be the case after babies were born.

The first column shows the predicted probability of marriage between birth and 30 months with education held constant at high school and the control variables fixed at their modal values. The second column in the table shows the odds of marriage for couples that have crossed racial/ethnic lines relative to homogamous couples. For example, the second row of Table 2 indicates that the odds of marriage for black/Hispanic couples are 1.36 times that of homogamous black couples (not significantly different). Each of the three types of heterogamous couples are repeated in two separate rows so they can be compared with homogamous couples from the racial or ethnic group of each parent.

The first panel of Table 2 shows that, for black parents, crossing racial lines does not lower the probability of marrying following a non-marital birth. Couples in which either parent was black were at least as likely to marry as couples in which both parents were black. For white and Hispanic parents, crossing racial lines lowers the probability of marriage when one parent in the couple is black. The odds of marriage for couples consisting of one Hispanic and one black

**Table 2: Parental Transitions to Marriage or Splitting Up between Birth and 30 Months by Race of Mother and Father**

<b>Transitions from Cohabiting or Romantically Involved to Marriage</b>				
<i>Parents' Joint Characteristics</i>	Predicted probability <sup>1</sup>	Odds relative to homogamy	z-stat	n
Black-Black	.13	—	—	1340
Black-Hispanic	.17	1.36	(1.07)	122
Black-White	.17	1.36	(.79)	64
Hispanic-Hispanic	.28	—	—	584
Black-Hispanic	.17	.53*	(2.13)	122
Hispanic-White	.26	.90	(.38)	92
White-White	.28	—	—	243
Black-White	.17	.55	(1.47)	64
Hispanic-White	.26	.93	(.26)	92
<b>Transitions from Cohabiting or Romantically Involved to Split Up</b>				
<i>Parents' Joint Characteristics</i>	Predicted probability <sup>1</sup>	Odds relative to homogamy	z-stat	n
Black-Black	.43	—	—	1340
Black-Hispanic	.43	1.03	(.14)	122
Black-White	.32	.64	(1.61)	64
Hispanic-Hispanic	.26	—	—	584
Black-Hispanic	.43	2.14**	(3.51)	122
Hisp-White	.42	2.03**	(2.97)	92
White-White	.32	—	—	243
Black-White	.32	1.01	(.03)	64
Hispanic-White	.42	1.53	(1.64)	92
<b>Transitions from Married to Split Up</b>				
<i>Parents' Joint Characteristics</i>	Predicted probability <sup>1</sup>	Odds relative to homogamy	z-stat	n
Black-Black	.30	—	—	235
Black-Hispanic	.39	1.48	(.75)	26
Black-White	.30	.98	(.02)	12
Hispanic-Hispanic	.13	—	—	204
Hispanic-Black	.39	4.41**	(2.61)	26
Hispanic-White	.32	3.34*	(2.37)	54
White-White	.24	—	—	413
White-Black	.30	1.33	(.34)	12
White-Hispanic	.32	1.52	(.92)	54

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Control variables (other children, children with other partners, twins, previous marriages, mother employment, father employment, age group and age difference) fixed at modal values and education fixed at high school.

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .01

parent were half that of couples in which both parents were Hispanic. Although white and black parents who crossed race/ethnic lines appear to be less likely to marry than their counterparts in racially homogamous white relationships, this difference was not statistically significant perhaps because of limited sample size. Crossing the white-Hispanic line does not reduce the odds of marriage relative to homogamous white or Hispanic couples.

The middle panel of Table 2 shows that unmarried Hispanic parents who crossed racial or ethnic lines were more likely to break up by the 30-month follow-up compared with homogamous Hispanic couples. Although crossing the white-Hispanic line did not discourage marriage, crossing this line increased the odds that an unmarried couple would break up. Black parents who crossed racial or ethnic lines were no more likely to break up than racially homogamous black parents. Perhaps surprisingly, the predicted probability of breaking up for black-white couples was relatively low and was similar to the predicted probability of breaking up for white couples. We suspect this may be a selection effect; black-white couples who have children together may have particularly resilient relationships. However, we are cautious in interpreting the findings for black-white couples because of the small sample size ( $n = 64$ ) for this group.

We also examined whether parents' joint race and ethnic characteristics affected their marital stability for the sample of parents who were married when their babies were born. Mirroring the results on unmarried parents splitting up after the birth, we find that married Hispanic parents have lower odds of splitting up than Hispanic-black or Hispanic-white couples. The effect of crossing race/ethnic lines for married Hispanics was dramatic. The odds of breaking up for Hispanic parents who crossed race/ethnic lines were three to four times that of Hispanic-Hispanic couples. Racial homogamy was not significantly related to marital stability for black or white parents.

The effects of racial homogamy on transitions to marriage and on transitions to breaking up were mostly consistent. In each case, crossing race or ethnic lines did not affect the relationship transitions of black parents, and in each case the effects of homogamy in encouraging marriage and discouraging break ups were largest for Hispanic parents. Although crossing the white-Hispanic line was not an impediment to marriage formation, it was associated with break ups.

### *Educational Assorting*

In Table 3, we examine the association between parents' joint educational characteristics and relationship transitions. Unmarried parents' joint education characteristics had only weak effects on marriage formation. Unmarried mothers who "partnered up" with respect to education were slightly more likely to marry than unmarried mothers whose partners had the same education, but the difference did not achieve statistical significance. Whether the couple had the same level of education, the mother had more education, or the father had more education, the predicted probability of marriage was similar and statistically indistinguishable. Unmarried parents' joint education characteristics also had no discernible effect on splitting up.

We also analyzed the effects of educational homogamy and hypergamy on



**Table 3: Parental Transitions to Marriage or Splitting Up between Birth and 30 months by Education of Mother and Father**

<b>Transitions from Cohabiting or Romantically involved to Marriage</b>				
<i>Parents' Joint Characteristics</i>	Predicted probability <sup>1</sup>	Odds relative to same	z-stat	n
Father more education	.34	1.19	(1.21)	628
Same education	.31	—	—	1167
Mother more education	.32	1.08	(.56)	650
<b>Transitions from Cohabiting or Romantically involved to Split Up</b>				
<i>Parents' Joint Characteristics</i>	Predicted probability <sup>1</sup>	Odds relative to same	z-stat	n
Father more education	.30	.99	(.11)	628
Same education	.31	—	—	1167
Mother more education	.29	.95	(.51)	650
<b>Transitions from Married to Split Up</b>				
<i>Parents' Joint Characteristics</i>	Predicted probability <sup>1</sup>	Odds relative to same	z-stat	n
Father more education	.17	1.24	(.73)	178
Same education	.14	—	—	523
Mother more education	.20	1.59	(1.76)	243

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Control variables (other children, children with other partners, twins, previous marriages, mother employment, father employment, age group and age difference) fixed at modal values and race fixed at White.

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .01

marital stability for parents who were married at birth. Couples with the same level of education had the lowest probability of marital dissolution. Marriages in which the mother had more education than the father were the least stable: the probability of marital dissolution was .20 for these couples compared with .14 for couples with the same education and .17 for couples in which the father had more education. Although differences across these categories were not statistically significant, the pattern of results is suggestive. These findings are in part consistent and in part inconsistent with expectations based on traditional gender roles in marriage. On the one hand, the marriages that are least traditional in terms of parents' educational characteristics, those in which mothers' educational attainment exceeds fathers, are the least stable. On the other hand, marriages in which parents are on equal footing in terms of education are the most stable. The most traditional couples, in which fathers have the educational advantage, fall somewhere in between. Similar to Brines and Joyner's (1999) findings for cohabiting couples, our results are consistent with the idea that gender roles have shifted to the point where women are permitted to have the same education as men, but relationships are strained when women have more education than their partners. Still, further research with larger samples is needed to confirm whether this pattern holds for the population as a whole.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the potential racial and class barriers that might prevent new parents from marrying using new data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study in 20 U.S. cities. In the study, about 10 percent of couples who recently had a baby together had crossed racial or ethnic lines. Almost half had a baby with someone who had a different level of educational attainment. We examined whether crossing race and ethnic or educational lines was associated with less serious relationships between parents at the time of a baby's birth, and whether crossing these lines discouraged subsequent transitions to marriage or were associated with relationship dissolution. Because we are looking at a sample of new parents in particular, these results have direct implications for the composition of the next generation and for the reproduction of inequality.

In spite of social pressures for like to marry like, we find that differences between a mother's and a father's educational attainment among new parents do not discourage marriage. It appears that the sum of the mother's and father's educational attainment is much more important in influencing marriage than are disparities between the two parents. Higher educational attainment increases relationship seriousness whether or not one's partner has higher educational attainment. In particular, contrary to what one might expect from the traditional breadwinner role that men have historically occupied, father's education has no more effect than mother's education on relationship seriousness. Instead, it appears that the total amount of resources matter much more than provider's gender. This is consistent with the qualitative evidence from Fragile Families in which unmarried couples report they want and plan to get married, but have not already done so because of a shortage of economic resources (Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan, 2005).

In recent decades, female educational attainment has been rising faster than male educational attainment. In minority populations, women are rapidly achieving educational parity and even surpassing men. Our findings suggest that, at least among those couples who have children, an absence of a male education advantage will not necessarily be an obstacle to marriage formation.

However, we hypothesized that educational differences would have a larger effect on marital disruption than on entry into marriage, because difficulties stemming from educational differences may worsen with time. Although differences across educationally homogamous and heterogamous groups were not statistically significant, the direction of effects was consistent with this hypothesis. Married couples with the same level of educational attainment were more likely to stay married than educationally heterogamous couples. Couples in which mother's education exceeded father's education were the least stable, suggesting relationship strain when typical gender roles are reversed.

With regard to race and ethnicity, we did not find across the board that being with a partner of a different race was a barrier to a more serious relationship. Instead, the effect of racial/ethnic heterogamy varied depending on the specific racial and ethnic combination and on the point of view from which it was measured. For fathers, the relationship status at baseline depended mainly on their own race/ethnicity rather than on the race/ethnicity of their partner. But,

for mothers, the relationship status varied depending on the race/ethnicity of the father. White or Hispanic mothers were much less likely to be married if they crossed race/ethnic lines and their partner was black. For black mothers, crossing race/ethnic lines had the opposite effect. Black mothers were more likely to be married if the father was Hispanic. Relationships at birth appear to be dictated by the race of the father.

These patterns were fairly consistent when we shifted our focus to transitions to marriage following a non-marital birth. Again, crossing racial lines *per se* did not seem to explain the differences in transitions to marriage. Instead, the important distinction in transition to marriage was between couples in which either partner was black and couples in which neither partner was black. The former group was less likely to marry than the latter.

We also found evidence that crossing race/ethnic lines was associated with relationship instability in particular for Hispanic parents. Interestingly, although Hispanic-white differences did not seem to prevent marriage, they did seem to lead to a higher rate of relationship instability. This signifies to us that the social obstacles to marriage among Hispanic-white parents may be small but the practical difficulties of staying together may not be. Notably, out of the nine racial/ethnic pairings we examined, the relationships between Hispanic mothers and fathers seemed particularly stable whether or not they were married. Hispanic couples were the least likely of any group to break up after their babies were born.

Because this article focused on new parents, the findings have implications for the intergenerational reproduction of inequality. Research has shown that children who grow up with stably married parents appear to be at an advantage relative to their peers in unmarried or unstable households. If crossing race and class lines interferes with marriage and relationship stability, then we can expect children of multiracial and interclass parents to be disadvantaged. However, our article finds that crossing race and class lines leads to less marriage and less stability only in select instances.

At most, inter-class parental relationships seem to only slightly increase the chance that children will grow up with a single parent. Children whose parents have different levels of education are equally likely to be born into a married household compared with children whose parents have similar levels of education. Our results provide a hint of evidence that children with educationally dissimilar parents may be more likely to experience the disruption of their parents' relationship. The main story, however, is that the overall level of parental educational resources matters much more for children than the similarity or dissimilarity of mother and father's education.

Typically, multiracial children are no more likely than their counterparts to live in unmarried or unstable families. At birth, children with a black father are less likely to have married parents than their counterparts with white or Hispanic fathers regardless of the race/ethnicity of the mother. Among children born to unmarried parents, children who have at least one black parent are less likely to see their parents subsequently marry, also regardless of whether these children are multiracial. Couples in which one parent was Hispanic and the other non-Hispanic are more likely to break-up than couples in which both parents are

Hispanic, but this appears to be a protective feature of having two Hispanic parents, who are less likely to break up than other same-race/ethnicity couples, rather than instability brought on by crossing ethnic lines.

Although social pressures for like to marry like are very strong, we find that racial and class divides among new parents are not as much of a barrier to marriage as one might expect.

## Notes

1. We use uniform weights within each of the 20 urban sampling areas, which correct for the undersampling of married births. For the married sample members, the weights are calculated as the number of marital births in a city divided by the number of marital births in the Fragile Families sample in that city. For the unmarried sample, the weights are calculated as the number of non-marital births in a city divided by the number of non-marital births in the Fragile Families sample in that city. After applying our weights, our sample approximately represents new parents in urban areas in the United States.
2. Our classification of black/Hispanic parents as Hispanic follows the convention of similar studies. It would be interesting to analyze the black/Hispanic parents as a separate group, but sample sizes were not large enough to permit a separate analysis (57 mothers and 58 fathers reported that they were both black and Hispanic).
3. The detailed multinomial logistic regression results appear in Appendix Table A.

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**Appendix Table A: Coefficients from Multinomial Logistic Regression of Parents' Relationship Status at Birth on Parents' Race, Education and Control Variables**

	Relationship at Birth (relative to married)		
	Cohabitation	Romantic	Split up
Mother Black	2.54* (2.47)	2.54 (1.87)	2.97* (2.34)
Mother Hispanic	.45 (1.05)	1.24* (2.11)	-.13 (.12)
Father Black	1.51** (3.14)	2.59** (4.55)	1.30 (1.68)
Father Hispanic	.73* (2.54)	1.41** (3.38)	1.02* (2.05)
Mother/Father Black	-2.61* (2.31)	-2.15 (1.47)	-2.63 (1.79)
Mother Black, Father Hispanic	-2.33* (2.11)	-2.28 (1.58)	-3.00* (2.14)
Mother Hispanic, Father Black	.41 (.57)	-.10 (.11)	.26 (.18)
Mother/Father Hispanic	-.38 (.75)	-1.52* (2.19)	-.44 (.39)
Mother high school	-.07 (.37)	.14 (.60)	-.43 (1.27)
Mother some college	-.09 (.39)	.10 (.36)	-.09 (.25)
Mother college degree	-3.81** (3.19)	-1.93** (3.06)	-1.74 (1.93)
Father high school	-.22 (1.06)	-.11 (.48)	-.03 (.10)
Father some college	-.96** (4.10)	-1.20** (3.96)	-.45 (1.26)
Father college degree	-3.19 (1.62)	.44 (.56)	.37 (.43)
Mother/Father high school	-.33 (1.12)	-.54 (1.63)	-.46 (1.00)
Mother high school/ Father some college	.99** (2.95)	.68 (1.57)	.48 (.85)
Mother high school/ Father college degree	2.79 (1.38)	-1.22 (1.20)	.66 (.56)
Mother some college/ Father high school	-.86** (2.63)	-1.11** (2.96)	-1.09* (2.19)
Mother/ Father some college	-.23 (.70)	-.06 (.14)	-1.29* (2.39)
Mother some college/ Father college degree	1.50 (.75)	-2.88** (3.08)	-1.35 (1.34)
Mother college degree/ Father high school	2.14 (1.69)	.86 (1.13)	.00 (.00)
Mother college degree/ Father some college	2.46* (1.98)	1.11 (1.50)	-1.45 (1.15)
Mother/Father college degree	3.59 (1.54)	-.81 (.79)	-2.43 (1.54)
Mother and father have prior children together	-.78** (7.26)	-1.56** (11.67)	-2.04** (9.61)

Appendix Table A (continued)

Mother has child with another partner	.78** (6.31)	.52** (3.62)	.40 (1.95)
Father has child with another partner	.47** (4.02)	.85** (6.44)	1.30** (6.96)
Mother worked last year	.58** (5.39)	.01 (.09)	.32 (1.80)
Father worked last week	-.56** (4.18)	-1.01** (6.89)	-2.07** (11.54)
Birth was twins	.64 (1.72)	1.12* (2.57)	-.36 (.36)
Mother was previously married	.69** (4.02)	.64** (2.94)	.97** (3.52)
Mother less than 20 years old	.50** (2.80)	.73** (3.80)	.70** (2.78)
Mother 25-29 years old	-.99** (8.09)	-1.42** (9.29)	-.79** (3.68)
Mother 30-34 years old	-1.51** (1.43)	-1.84** (9.97)	-1.50** (5.42)
Mother 35 years or older	-1.37** (7.61)	-1.44** (6.70)	-1.31** (3.97)
Mother 5 or more years older than father	.30 (1.33)	.30 (1.06)	.62 (1.67)
Father 5 or more years older than mother	-.09 (.75)	-.28 (1.95)	.21 (1.13)
Father 10 or more years older than mother	.15 (.80)	.02 (.10)	-.60 (1.88)
Intercept	.04 (.17)	-.39 (1.26)	-.25 (.66)
N	4373		
Likelihood ratio chi-square	2899.36		
P-value	.000		
Pseudo R-squared	.2872		

\*p &lt; .05 \*\*p &lt; .01