The Role of the Parent-Adolescent Relationship in Shaping Adolescents' Attitudes Toward Marital Relationships

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Abstract

The closeness of parent-adolescent relationships in eleventh grade was examined as a predictor of adolescents' attitudes toward marital relationships one-year after high school. The sample of 792 African and European American adolescents is drawn from the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context (MADIC) study. Measures included youth reports of the quality of parent-adolescent relationships in the 11th grade and adolescents' attitudes toward marital relationships at age 19. Boys who shared close relationships with their biological mothers and fathers, stepfathers, and noncustodial fathers had more positive attitudes toward marriage and felt less likely to divorce. No significant findings were observed for girls. Results suggest that adolescent boys who feel close to their fathers are more likely to have positive marital attitudes.

Key Words: Marital Attitudes, Father-adolescent Relations, Parental Influence, Adolescent Attitudes, Gender Differences, Noncustodial Fathers and Stepfathers
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Both theoretical and empirical literature suggest that the parent-adolescent relationship should influence adolescents' attitudes toward romantic relationships. For example, securely attached adolescents are able to develop successful relationships and report greater satisfaction with partners later in life (Moeller & Stattin, 2001). At least two theories explain how relationships with one's parent may impact children's conceptions about intimacy.

First, attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) emphasizes the influence of the earliest parent-child relationships on the child's internal working model of relationships. Bowlby (1988) suggests that the parent-child relationship in infancy serves as the prototype for all subsequent love relationships. This prototype for love relationships is assured to be enduring and applicable to both peer relationships and opposite-sex love relationships (Feldman, Gowan & Fisher, 1998). In fact, secure attachments to a primary caregiver in infancy are likely to be expressed in the security and trust of an adult romantic partner, whereas insecure attachments are not. Adults characterized as insecure in their romantic relationships recall having more negative expectations and beliefs about love as well as histories of shorter romantic relationships than those adults characterized as securely attached in their romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Similarly, adolescents who experience a hostile, emotionally distant relationship with their mothers and fathers during adolescence may have negative expectations for romantic relationships (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). Presumably, adults who had a securely attached relationship with their mothers and fathers are likely to possess internal working models that allow them to have a desirable perception of the self and also to feel that others are open to them (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). Additionally, attachment to one's parent may affect adolescents'
emotional competence in romantic relationships through their influence on adolescents’ social skills (Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2001).

Second, according to social learning theory, the family serves as the training ground for the child to learn parental attitudes about marriage and divorce. Children’s expectations about marriage and intimacy and their ideas about opposite-sex relationships should stem from the type of relationship their parents have with one another (Greenberg & Nay, 1982; Feldman et al., 1998). In support of this suggestion, parents’ happiness with their marital relationships is associated with adolescents’ positive attitudes toward marriage (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992). In contrast, parental conflict is associated with negative views towards marriage and dating and with adolescents’ fear of failure in romantic relationships (Slater & Calhoun, 1988; Gabardi & Rosen, 1992). Although children may learn about intimacy from other sources (e.g., media), children’s first exposure to romantic relationships is typically at home modeled via their parents’ marital relationship.

The parent-child relationship serves as an additional context for social learning. Children observe how their parents relate to them and use this experiential knowledge as a foundation for developing intimacy in their own relationships. Adolescents whose mothers and fathers are nurturing and involved in their lives are more likely to exhibit behaviors that are warm, supportive, and low in hostility in their romantic relationships over time; in turn, these competent behaviors are positively related to relationship quality in adolescents’ romantic relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000).

Parents also socialize their children to behave and think in particular ways that may later influence how they come to understand and view romantic relationships. For instance, parents who teach their children that divorce is negative are likely to raise adolescents who also view
divorce negatively. In comparison, parents who exhibit happiness in their marriages are likely to have adolescents’ who feel positive about marital relationships. Social learning and attachment theorists posit that adolescents who are raised in an environment in which their parents have a healthy marriage and whose parents treat them with warmth, emotional availability, and structure may be better prepared for intimacy and relating to others farther in life (Gray & Steinberg, 1999).

*Father-Adolescent Relationships and their Influence on Adolescents’ Romantic Relationships*

Most research on this topic has focused on the mother-child dyad in two-parent families (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 1997). To date, we know little about how the quality of adolescents’ relationships with their fathers—especially noncustodial fathers and stepfathers—might play a role in shaping adolescents’ attitudes about marriage and divorce. We do know that fathers tend to engage less with their adolescent children than mothers and that when they do engage in activities with their children they tend to be those related to play and leisure activities (Shulman & Klein, 1993). Although fathers tend to display less intimacy with their adolescents than mothers, the level of intimacy with fathers has been shown to be more predictive of adolescent adjustment than the level of intimacy with mothers (LeCroy, 1988). Moreover, feeling close to one’s father (independent of feeling close to one’s mother) is associated with adults’ psychological adjustment—their happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological distress (Amato, 1994). Although there is little evidence suggesting a link between father-adolescent relationships and adolescents’ attitudes toward marriage and divorce, fathers may play a role—a different role than mothers—in shaping these attitudes.

Furthermore, we know little information about how nontraditional father types influence adolescents’ development or their beliefs about marital relationships (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda,
Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). A major goal of the present study, therefore, is to compare the impact of parents, namely biological custodial fathers, biological noncustodial fathers, and stepfathers, on adolescents' attitudes toward marital relationships over time.

**Noncustodial Fathers and Adolescents' Attitudes Toward Romantic Relationships**

High rates of divorce, remarriage, and single parenting have created a generation of children who experience family transitions on a regular basis. Up to 50% of married couples will divorce during their lifetime (Bray & Hetherington, 1993). Because the child is likely to reside with the mother in the majority of divorce cases (Montgomery, Anderson, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1992), experiencing a family transition often involves maintaining a relationship with a noncustodial biological father for children and adolescents.

Following divorce, children's relationships with their noncustodial biological father are often compromised (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). Adolescents of divorce report negative appraisals of their relationship with their fathers (Lopez, 1987), report feeling less close to their fathers (Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993), harbor anger and resentment towards their fathers (Lopez, 1991), and tend to view their relationship with their noncustodial father less positively than adolescents of intact families (Fine, Moreland, & Schwebel, 1983). Adults who have experienced family transitions report being less positively attached to their fathers and to view the father as less caring than adults from intact families (Tayler, Parker & Roy, 1995). Remarriage can also contribute to problems in maintaining relationships with noncustodial fathers because the fathers may expect the stepmother to play a significant role in parenting (Clingempeel, Brand, & Ievoli, 1984). Children may become resentful of a stepmother and may in turn resent their father for introducing a new mother figure into their lives.
Nonetheless, noncustodial fathers who maintain relationships with their adolescent children can positively influence their adolescents’ lives (White & Gilbreth, 2001). Feelings of closeness in the father-child relationship and authoritative parenting have been positively associated with academic success and negatively associated with children’s internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Emotional aspects of the father-child relationship involving attachment and high levels of involvement have beneficial effects including reducing both emotional distress and participation in delinquent behavior (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993). Furthermore, children’s well being is advanced when noncustodial fathers maintain positive relationships, participate in activities, and spend holidays with their children (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996). Taken together, these findings suggest that adolescents who feel close to their fathers—regardless of their custodial status—are better adjusted and will hold more positive attitudes toward marital relationships.

*Stepfathers and Adolescents’ Attitudes Toward Romantic Relationships*

With approximately 75% of men and 66% of women remarrying sometime following a divorce, many adolescents will live with a stepparent at some point in their lives (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Adolescents growing up in a stepfamily may share a different kind of relationship with their stepfather than the one they share with their biological father. This relationship may involve a different set of interpersonal dynamics and living circumstances, which can sometimes create problems.

At first, many adolescents resist the entry of a stepfather into their lives. Many teenagers (especially girls) may display intense and sustained resistance to the entry of the stepfather (Ganong & Coleman, 1987; Santrock, Warshak, Lindbergh, & Meadows, 1982; author citation). These adolescents tend to exhibit noncommunicative behavior such as withdrawal and
avoidance. If stepfathers continue to encounter resistance from their stepchildren, they tend to become distant, feel less closeness, and exhibit less warmth toward their stepchildren (author citation), thereby further exacerbating problems in the relationship. Nonetheless, some adolescents’ relationships with their stepfathers improve over time and may become the kind of close relationships that will benefit them (Hetherington, 1993).

Relatively little research has examined the effect of a close stepfather-stepchild relationship on adolescents’ attitudes toward marriage and divorce. Some studies have indicated that having a close relationship with a stepfather can have positive implications for adolescents’ adjustment (Amato, 1994). For instance, living in a family with a father or stepfather serves as a protective factor for adolescents against peer pressure and drug use (Farrell & White, 1998). Having a good relationship with a stepfather can also bolster adolescents’ self-esteem (Amato, 1986). Stepfathers also may play a significant role in adolescents’ attitudes toward romantic relationships, especially if an adolescent feels close to his or her stepfather. From this perspective, adolescents who feel close to their fathers—regardless of biological status—may hold more positive attitudes toward marital relationships.

*Gender Differences in Adolescents’ Attitudes Toward Romantic Relationships*

Few studies have examined the role of fathers in influencing adolescent boys’ and girls’ attitudes toward marital relationships; the conducted research has yielded inconsistent findings. In examining girls’ relationships with their fathers, Scheffler & Naus (1999) found a link between father affirmation and women’s fear of intimacy. Women who do not feel affirmed by their fathers in adolescence may respond to male partners as they responded to their elusive father. These women desperately seek intimacy but are unable to believe that men can be trusted to remain close; they tend to be guarded in their interactions with potential romantic partners.
Although the Scheffler & Naus (1999) study examined only adolescent girls, other studies have investigated both young men and women. These studies have found that father-son relationships are more strongly linked to the quality of adolescent boys’ later adult relationships than adolescent girls’ (Moeller & Stattin, 2001; Collins, Newman, & McKenry, 1995). Boys who shared an affectionate and trustful relationship with their father in adolescence felt greater satisfaction with their romantic partners in midlife; the same was not true for girls (Moeller & Stattin, 2001).

Although mixed, the empirical evidence, together with theory, suggests that fathers may have a different effect on boys than girls with respect to intimacy and romantic relationships in adolescence and adulthood. Social learning theorists posit that same sex modeling occurs throughout childhood and adolescence whereby girls and boys look to their same-sex parent as a way of identifying with gender roles (Crouter, Manke, & McHale, 1995; Fagot, Rodgers, & Linebach, 2000). The developmental literature also suggests that the father-daughter dyad is the least close of all four parent-child dyads (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), and adolescent boys report feeling closer to their fathers than adolescent girls (Richardson, Galambos, Schulenberg, & Petersen, 1984).

Fathers may be more influential in boys’ lives rather than girls’ lives because boys are more likely to seek guidance from their fathers than girls. In fact, previous literature has suggested that fathers may play a stronger role in sons’ rather than daughters’ development (Lamb, 1987; Synder, Velasquez, Clark, & Means-Christensen, 1997). Given this evidence, fathers might also be more influential for boys than girls in the domain of intimacy and romantic relationships during adolescence.

Aims of the Present Study
We know little about how the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship might be related to adolescents' views about intimacy and romantic relationships over time. The role of fathers in shaping both adolescent boys' and girls' attitudes toward marital relationships has been largely neglected in the literature; however, fathers are clearly important in influencing how adolescents view intimacy in love relationships. Moreover, most of the research in this area has focused solely on European American families and children. Few studies have investigated relations among these variables over time in more diverse samples of adolescents and their families.

A major goal of this study is to investigate longitudinal relations between parent-adolescent closeness and adolescents' attitudes toward marital relationships in a diverse sample of European- and African American adolescents. First, we hypothesize that adolescents who reported close relationships with their mothers and fathers in the eleventh grade would later report at age 19 more positive attitudes toward marriage and a lower likelihood of divorcing in the future. Second, we expect that the pattern of relations between father-adolescent closeness and attitudes toward marital relationships would not differ for stepfathers and noncustodial fathers over time. Regardless of the biological relationship and custodial status, an adolescent who feels close to his father should hold more positive attitudes about marital relationships than one who does not feel close to his father. Third, we predict a gender effect with the father-adolescent relationship having a stronger impact for adolescent boys than adolescent girls. Specifically, we hypothesize that boys who reported close father-adolescent relationships in eleventh grade would later report at age 19 more positive attitudes toward marriage and a lower likelihood of divorcing in the future.
Method

Sample

Participants were part of the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context (MADIC) study, a longitudinal study examining the influences of the home, neighborhood, schools, and peer relationships on adolescents’ academic, emotional, and social development. At Wave 1, the sample included 1,498 families. Five waves of data have been collected to date. The first wave of data was collected in the fall/winter of 1991/1992, when the adolescents were in the seventh grade (Mean age=12.78, SD=1.42). Families were recruited for the study through the adolescents’ public middle schools. A total of 1,961 families expressed an interest in the study by signing a form permitting us to contact them. After the families were initially contacted, approximately 76% agreed to participate and the remaining 24% refused to participate because of time constraints, problems with scheduling, or because of lack of interest in participating in the study. The sample included families living in rural, suburban, and urban neighborhoods of one large county, Prince George’s County, located in Maryland. The participants in this study were recruited from 23 public middle schools.

At Wave 1, 49% percent of the adolescents participating in the study were females. Approximately 30% percent identified themselves as White or European American and 60% percent identified themselves as Black or African American. The remainder of the sample (10%) that included other ethnic groups (e.g., mixed race categories) was excluded from further analyses because of small group sizes. The mean family income level in 1991 was $45,000 - $50,000 for African Americans and $50,000 - $55,000 for European Americans. Additionally, a majority of the parents in the sample had graduated from high school and had at least some college education (59% and 45% for African and European Americans respectively). About 32%
of African American parents and 49% of European American parents had a college degree or some graduate or professional training. As a whole, the sample is somewhat wealthier and better educated than the average American family. Additionally, this sample is unique in its demographic features. Both groups of African American and European American adolescents are drawn from populations of almost comparable socio-economic diversity with neither group predominantly represented at the extremes of the socio-economic spectrum. Taken together, these demographics present the unique opportunity to study the development of African American and European American adolescents in maximally comparable socio-demographic circumstances.

For this study, we used data from Waves 4 and 5 only. The data from Waves 4 and 5 were collected when the adolescents were in the eleventh grade (Mean age=16.52, SD=.63) and one-year post high school, respectively. The sample at Wave 5 included 62% of the participants from the original sample at Wave 1 (n = 919), an adequate retention rate given the length and nature of this study. Participants who dropped completely out of the study (n = 286) tended to be the least well-functioning people in the initial sample (see author citation for further detail). The adolescents who dropped-out of the study displayed lower levels of achievement (assessed using a combination of grade point average [GPA] and test scores) and their parents were less educated on average than those who remained in the study. Although the differences are reliable, the effect sizes are relatively modest. To address our specific research objectives, we used data from only a subset of participants from the larger MADIC study. Depending on the question of interest, we limited the sample based on certain criteria. Our selection criteria as well as the demographic characteristics of each sub-sample are described in detail below.
Procedure

Sixty-two interviewers (60% African American, 40% European American; 89% female) participated in collecting data for Waves 1 through 4 of the study. At each wave, one of the 62 trained interviewers visited each family's home to conduct face-to-face interviews and give out self-administered surveys. Each adolescent and his/her primary caregiver were interviewed using a face-to-face interview (lasting 1-2 hours) and a questionnaire (lasting 30-60 minutes). A second caregiver (usually the father) also filled out a questionnaire. A caregiver was defined as an individual living in the home with the adolescent. The questionnaires contained a broad range of items concerning adolescent development such as peer relationships, environmental stressors, and family dynamics. The caregiver and adolescent were each paid $20.00 for their participation in the study.

The fifth wave of data was collected in the summer of 1998, one-year after the adolescents finished high school. For this wave, questionnaires were mailed to the participants asking them questions about their romantic relationships and their job or schooling status, among other factors. Participants were sent a $35.00 check in the mail after successfully completing and mailing the questionnaires back to the researchers.

Measures

Scale construction. Scales measuring parent-adolescent closeness and attitudes toward marital relationships were derived theoretically and empirically. First, all of the discrete items were organized according to conceptual constructs identified a priori by the researchers. Factor analyses then were conducted to verify each construct. Those items with factor loadings of .5 or better were retained. Scales were created by averaging the items for each construct. Derived from existing instruments and surveys that have been well validated (author citation), the scales
measuring parent-adolescent closeness and adolescents’ attitudes toward marital relationships display good face and discriminant validity as well as good internal reliability: Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .70 to .86.

Demographic variables. Socio-demographic variables such as gender (1=male, 2=female), ethnicity (1=African American, 2=European American), and total family income were created using interview data collected at Wave 1. Data regarding family structure were obtained from questionnaires and face-to-face interviews at Wave 4. The categorical variable for family structure included five different types of families: nondivorced families with both parents living in the home, stepfamilies, single-parent families in which the parents had divorced, single-parent families in which the parents never married, and single-parent families in which the parent had a live-in partner. We created two dichotomous variables for custodial status (1=custodial biological father, 2=noncustodial biological father) and biological status (1=biological nondivorced father, 2=residential stepfather) based on a combination of family structure and the adolescent’s relationship to the father of interest. We did not create parallel variables for mothers because the sample contains so few noncustodial mothers (n = 8) and stepmothers (n = 8).

Parent-adolescent closeness. The closeness of the adolescents’ relationships with their mother, father, and stepfather was assessed by the adolescents’ report of how close they felt to each parent and how much they identified with each parent at Wave 4. All of the questions concerning the adolescents’ biological mother, biological father (both custodial and noncustodial), and stepfather were parallel. Four items comprised each scale for all of the parental figures. For the questions “How much do you respect your mother (father/stepfather)?” and “How much do you want to be like the kind of person your mother (father/stepfather) is when you are an adult?” scores were reported on a 4-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (“not
at all”) to 4 (“a lot”). For the question “How close do you feel to your mother (father/stepfather)?” responses were measured on a 4-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (“not very close”) to 4 (“extremely close”). Finally, for the item “How often do you and your mother (father/stepfather) do things together that you enjoy?” scores were indicated by responses ranging from 1 (“almost never”) to 4 (“about once a week”). The composite closeness measure was created by summing and averaging the items for the mother, father, and stepfather separately. Higher scores indicated a closer relationship with the parental figure. Cronbach’s alpha was .73 and .80 for biological mothers and fathers, respectively. The alpha was .85 for noncustodial biological fathers and .86 for residential stepfathers.

*Attitudes toward marital relationships.* Modified from earlier work by the authors (e.g., author citation), our dependent variables assessed adolescents’ attitudes toward marriage and divorce at Wave 5 when the adolescents were approximately 19-years old. To measure their attitudes toward marriage, adolescents were asked to respond to 3 items. For the questions "How much do you agree that marriage leads to a fuller life?" and "How much do you agree that marriage leads to a happier life?" scores were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”). Similarly, scores for the question “How likely do you think you are to get married?” were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “will not marry anyone”, 5 = “very likely”). A composite measure for the adolescents’ attitudes toward marriage was created by summing and averaging the three items. Higher scores indicated more positive attitudes toward marriage. Cronbach’s alpha was .70 for this scale.

Adolescents’ attitudes toward divorce were derived from the adolescents’ predictions about how likely they thought their own marriages would end in divorce. As before, adolescents responded to three items designed to tap their attitudes toward divorce. The questions “How
likely do you think you are to get divorced?” and “How likely do you think you are to marry more than once?” were measured on a common 4-point Likert scale (1 = “very unlikely” to 4 = “very likely”). In addition, scores for the question “How likely do you think you are to have a happy, successful marriage?” were measured on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = “very likely” to 4 = “very unlikely”). These items were summed and averaged to create a composite measure for adolescents’ attitudes toward divorce. Higher scores on this scale indicated that the adolescents felt that their future marriages were more likely to end in divorce. For this scale, Cronbach’s alpha was .74.

Results

General Plan of Analysis

Means and standard deviations for the major study variables are presented in Table 1. A series of hierarchical linear regressions was performed to test the relations between parent-adolescent closeness (including biological mothers and fathers, noncustodial fathers, and stepfathers) and adolescents’ attitudes toward marital relationships. Multiple regression was selected over other methods because it offers a straightforward way to examine main effects and interactions.

The following general analytic strategy was used to examine our major research questions. Using attitudes toward marriage and divorce at Wave 5 as the dependent variables, adolescent reports of parent-adolescent closeness at Wave 4 were entered into the equation (Step 2) after controlling for the relevant demographic variables (i.e., ethnicity, gender, family income) (Step 1). In addition, we included biological status or custodial status at this first step depending on the question at hand (see Analyses 2 and 3). A third block of variables then was entered into the equation that consisted of the interaction term between gender and closeness of the parent-
adolescent relationship and other relevant 2-way interactions (e.g., custodial status X closeness, gender X custodial status) (Step 3). The parent-adolescent closeness variable was centered prior to forming the product terms of the interaction to reduce multicollinearity among the predictors (Aiken & West, 1992). Finally, in Analyses 2 and 3, we tested two 3-way interactions (i.e., gender X custodial status X closeness; gender X biological status X closeness) at the fourth step.

A preliminary set of analyses also was conducted within race (i.e., African American, European American). Although few significant differences were observed between African Americans and European Americans in the study, we did find a few notable exceptions to this general pattern of findings. Given we had no specific hypotheses regarding the role of ethnicity, we did not pursue these analyses because we viewed them as exploratory in nature. Future research should investigate this further. Please contact the first author for full details regarding these findings.

Analysis 1

In our first set of analyses, we selected a sub-sample of the original sample that included adolescents living in nondivorced homes with their biological parents ($n=454$) at Wave 4. Like the larger sample, the resulting sample included approximately half boys ($n=222$) and half girls ($n=232$). Approximately 56% of the adolescents were African American and 44% of the adolescents were European American. Analyses conducted to compare our sample to the rest of the MADIC sample at Wave 4 indicated significant differences on a variety of demographic variables including total family income, parents’ level of education, and youth’s academic performance (i.e., GPA). Not surprisingly, adolescents in this sample came from somewhat wealthier and better educated families and were doing better in school than the remaining adolescents from the MADIC sample.
Using the general strategy described previously, we performed analyses separately for biological mothers and fathers. As above, the dependent variables were adolescents' attitudes toward marriage and divorce at Wave 5. Adolescent reports of parent-adolescent closeness at Wave 4 were entered into the equation after the relevant demographic variables (i.e., ethnicity, gender, family income). A third block was entered into the equation that included the interaction term between gender and parent-adolescent closeness.

*Adolescents and their biological mothers.* As shown in Table 2, a significant main effect revealed that adolescents who had a close mother-adolescent relationship in the eleventh grade felt that their future marriages were less likely to result in divorce at age 19 than adolescents who did not report having a close mother-adolescent relationship ($\beta = -.23, p < .001$). In contrast, the closeness of the mother-adolescent relationship did not predict adolescents' attitudes toward marriage at Wave 5 (see Table 2). Instead, we found a significant interaction between the adolescents' gender and closeness of the mother-adolescent relationship at Wave 4. As shown in Figure 1, boys who had a close relationship with their mother as eleventh graders had more positive views toward marriage at age 19 than boys who did not have a close relationship with their mother ($\beta = .30, p < .01$). No significant relation was found for the girls. These findings suggest that the mother-adolescent relationship may play an important role in shaping adolescent boys' attitudes toward marital relationships.

*Adolescents and their biological fathers.* Similar to results obtained with mothers, we found a significant interaction between the adolescents' gender and father-adolescent closeness at Wave 4 for both attitudes toward marriage and attitudes toward divorce at Wave 5 (see Table 3). As shown in Figure 2, boys who felt close to their fathers as eleventh graders later reported more positive attitudes toward marriage at age 19 than boys who did not feel close to their fathers as
eleventh graders ($\beta=.33, p<.01$). Similarly, boys who experienced a close father-son relationship in the eleventh grade were less likely to believe as 19-year olds that they would divorce in the future than boys who did not have a close father-son relationship ($\beta=-.42, p<.001$) (see Figure 3). No significant relations between the father-daughter relationship and attitudes toward marriage or divorce were observed for the girls. Taken together, these findings suggest that the father-adolescent relationship in nondivorced families may be important in determining adolescent boys' attitudes toward marital relationships; however, the same does not appear to be true for adolescent girls.

*Analysis 2*

To investigate the relative influence of biological fathers living in and out of the home on adolescents' attitudes toward marital relationships, we selected a sub-sample ($n=602$) of the original sample that included only adolescents and their custodial ($n=389$) and noncustodial ($n=213$) biological fathers at Wave 4. This sub-sample was limited to adolescents living with their biological fathers in nondivorced homes (i.e., custodial) and adolescents who were not living with their biological fathers (i.e., noncustodial) in any kind of family situation. The resulting sample is about half boys and half girls (50% and 50%). 62% of the adolescents were African American and 38% of the adolescents were European American. As before, families in this study were somewhat wealthier and more educated on average and adolescents performed slightly better academically than the remaining adolescents from the full MADIC sample.

Two hierarchical regressions were performed to compare the relative influence of custodial and noncustodial biological fathers on adolescents’ attitudes towards marital relationships over time. Specifically, we examined both the closeness of the father-adolescent relationship and custodial status as predictors of youth’s attitudes about marriage and divorce. That is, an
adolescent who feels close to his or her father should hold more positive attitudes toward marital relationships regardless of whether or not he lives with the adolescent. As before, we also investigated the role of gender in these analyses. We expected the father-son effect to be stronger than the father-daughter effect.

Using attitudes toward marriage and divorce as the dependent variables, adolescent reports of the closeness of the father-adolescent relationship were entered into the equation (Step 2) after the relevant demographic variables (i.e., ethnicity, gender, family income, and custodial status) (Step 1). Three interaction terms—gender X closeness, gender X custodial status, and custodial status X closeness—were entered next (Step 3) followed by a fourth block consisting of one 3-way interaction (i.e., gender X custodial status X closeness).

Similar to Analysis 1, we found a significant interaction between the adolescents’ gender and father-adolescent closeness for attitudes toward divorce (see Table 4). As depicted in Figure 4, adolescent boys who felt close to their biological fathers—both custodial and noncustodial—in the eleventh grade later reported at age 19 that they were less likely to divorce in the future than adolescent boys who did not have a close relationship with their biological fathers ($\beta = -0.34$, $p < .001$). No significant effect was found for girls. A significant three-way interaction suggested that boys who felt close to their biological custodial fathers at Wave 4 had more positive attitudes toward marriage at age 19 ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < .01$) than those boys who did not feel close to their biological custodial fathers (see Figure 5). The same effect was not found for adolescent girls or for adolescent boys who shared a close relationship with their biological noncustodial father.

*Analysis 3*
To compare the roles of biological fathers and stepfathers in shaping adolescents' attitudes toward marriage and divorce, a sub-sample of the MADIC sample was selected to include only those adolescents living with their biological fathers and stepfathers (n=438) at Wave 4. The sub-sample is limited specifically to adolescents living with their biological fathers in nondivorced homes (n=396) and adolescents living with their stepfathers and biological mothers in remarried families (n=42). The sub-sample is comprised of half boys and half girls (48% and 52%, respectively). 57% and 43% of the adolescents were African American and European American respectively. Because single mothers are not included in this analysis as before, the participants in this sample were somewhat wealthier and better educated on average than those remaining in the MADIC sample at Wave 4. Additionally, adolescents in this sub-sample were performing better in school than other adolescents from the larger MADIC sample.

A set of two hierarchical regressions was conducted to assess how the closeness of the father-child relationship (defined here as the adolescents’ relationships with their biological fathers and stepfathers) predicts adolescents’ attitudes toward marital relationships. In this instance, we examined father-child closeness and the relation between biological status and attitudes toward marriage and divorce. Adolescents who feel close to their fathers—biological fathers and stepfathers alike—should later report more positive attitudes toward marriage and believe that they are less likely to divorce in the future. As before, we also investigated the role of the adolescents’ gender in these analyses. We expected the effect for fathers and adolescent boys to be stronger than the effect for fathers and adolescent girls.

Using attitudes toward marriage and divorce as the dependent variables, adolescent reports of the closeness of the father-child relationship were entered into the equation (Step 2) after the relevant demographic variables (i.e., ethnicity, gender, family income, and biological
status) (Step 1). A third block of variables then was entered into the equation that included three interaction terms—gender X closeness, gender X biological status, and biological status X closeness (Step 3). Lastly, a fourth block of variables was entered to assess the three-way interaction among gender, biological status, and closeness of the father-child relationship.

Results are presented in Table 5. Neither the two-way nor the three-way interaction involving biological status and closeness was a significant predictor of attitudes toward marriage or divorce. Nonetheless, two significant gender X closeness interactions were observed in this analysis. As depicted in Figures 6 and 7, boys who felt close to their biological fathers and stepfathers as eleventh graders had more positive attitudes toward marriage ($\beta=.30, p<.01$) and felt less likely at age 19 to later divorce ($\beta=-.39, p<.001$) than boys who did not feel close to their fathers. The same effects were not found for girls. Additionally, as shown in Figure 8, a significant interaction between gender and biological status indicated that adolescent boys who were living with their stepfathers ($M=2.11, SD=.80$) in the eleventh grade felt more likely to divorce in the future at age 19 than adolescent boys who were living with their biological fathers ($M=1.45, SD=.51$), $F(1, 254) = 6.15, p<.05$. No significant effect was observed with girls in this sample ($M=1.49, SD=.59$ and $M=1.46, SD=.59$ for girls living with their biological fathers and stepfathers, respectively). The 3-way interaction between gender, biological status, and closeness was not a significant predictor of attitudes toward marriage or divorce. Taken together, these results are consistent with the inference that the closeness of the father-son relationship influences adolescent boys’ attitudes toward marital relationships both in the case of boys living with their biological fathers and boys living with their stepfathers. These findings also suggest that boys who live with a stepfather feel more vulnerable to divorcing in their future lives than boys who live with a biological father in a nondivorced family.
Discussion

In this study, we examined how the closeness of parent-adolescent relationships influences adolescents’ attitudes toward marriage and divorce over time. First, we hypothesized that adolescents growing up in nondivorced families who reported close relationships with their biological mothers and fathers in the eleventh grade would later report at age 19 more positive attitudes toward marriage and a lower likelihood of divorcing in the future. The results provided partial support for this hypothesis. It was true primarily for adolescent boys and the strength of the effect varied some by family type. Parent-adolescent closeness for both biological mothers and fathers predicted attitudes toward marital relationships primarily for the boys in this sample. The only exception to this pattern was a significant effect of mother-adolescent closeness on both young women’s and men’s attitudes toward divorce. In this instance, adolescents of both sexes were less likely to expect to divorce in the future if they had a close relationship with their mother. Consistent with both attachment theory and social learning theory, these findings suggest that biological mothers and fathers from intact families are important in fostering adolescents’ faith in the quality and duration of marital relationships.

Second, we expected that the pattern of relations between father-adolescent closeness and attitudes toward marital relationships would not differ for custodial and noncustodial fathers over time. Contrary to our hypothesis, boys who felt close to their custodial fathers rather than their noncustodial fathers had more positive attitudes toward marriage. Such a finding might reflect that the kind of relationship a custodial father and a noncustodial father share with their adolescents may be inherently dissimilar. Noncustodial fathers spend less time with their adolescents following divorce for a variety of reasons including conflicts with the other parent, feeling that they do not understand their children, and dating other women (Kissman, 2001;
Stephens, 1996). However, custodial fathers spend a great deal of time with their offspring participating in activities (Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001), which may allow them to have closer and more involved relationships with their offspring than noncustodial fathers. Another possibility from a social learning theory perspective is that boys come to believe in the state of their biological fathers if they feel close to them. Thus, if an adolescent boy is close to his noncustodial father he should have a less “rosy” view of marriage because his parents are not together and he is close to his father (author citation).

Despite this finding, we found that in measuring adolescents’ attitudes toward divorce, custodial status did not matter—a finding consistent with our hypothesis. A close relationship with both custodial and noncustodial fathers in the eleventh grade predicted feeling likely to divorce in the future for 19-year old boys. One reason for this finding is that closeness in the father-adolescent relationship may be a positive influence over adolescents’ attitudes toward divorce, even though they may have experienced divorce in their family situation. Attachment theory lends support to this notion such that adolescents who are securely attached to their parents are more likely to feel attached to their romantic partners in early adulthood (Roisman, Madsen, Henninghausen, Sroufe, & Collins, 2001). In addition, social learning theory suggests that boys who learn how to have successful close relationships with their fathers also expect successful close romantic relationships later in life. Not sharing a close relationship with a father may be a risk factor for adolescents’ marital attitudes. Adolescents may have more negative attitudes toward the institution of marriage and indeed their own marital futures. Alternatively, feeling more likely to divorce in one’s future reflects realistic ideas about divorce given current divorce rates, and it may imply that adolescents do not feel condemned to remain in unhappy marriages (author citation).
Third, we examined relations among father-adolescent closeness, biological status and adolescents' attitudes toward marriage and divorce over time. Although a relationship with a stepfather may be qualitatively different than a relationship with a biological father, we hypothesized that the pattern of associations between father-adolescent closeness and adolescents' attitudes toward marital relationships would not vary for biological fathers and residential stepfathers. As expected, boys who felt close to their biological fathers or their stepfathers in the eleventh grade felt more positively about marriage and felt less likely to divorce in the future at age 19. These findings are consistent with the previous findings: boys who feel close to their father—regardless of biological status—have better attitudes about intimacy and the prospect of their own married lives than boys who do not feel close to their fathers.

The importance of a close relationship with a stepfather for adolescent boys’ attitudes toward marital relationships is interesting for two reasons. First, one might hypothesize that a close relationship with a biological father might somehow be different or perhaps even more intimate than a relationship with a stepfather given the length of time a boy has known his biological father versus his stepfather. Secondly, because boys who are living with their stepfathers have already experienced the divorce of their biological parents, one might guess that these boys would already have less confidence in marriage as an enduring institution more so than boys who have not experienced their parents’ divorce.

Although the analyses on closeness and attitudes toward marriage did not reflect this latter notion, the interaction of gender by biological status was significant such that boys who lived with their stepfathers in the eleventh grade felt at age 19 more likely to divorce in the future. Why might this be true in light of the results suggesting that boys who share close
relationships with either biological fathers or stepfathers feel less likely to divorce in the future? Perhaps boys who were living with a stepfathers did not share as close a relationship with their stepfather as boys living with a biological father in a nondivorced family. Not feeling close to a stepfather could reflect tensions that many adolescents feel following remarriage (author citation). Alternatively, these boys could be more realistic about the prospect of divorce having witnessed a divorce and a remarriage whereby they learned that divorce is not such a horrible event and that the probability of having a divorce is greater than zero. Consequentially, they would have less faith in marriage or its endurance and see themselves at a higher risk for divorcing in the future. Given these findings, a close relationship with a stepfather may lessen negative feelings about marriage and may enhance adolescent boys’ projections of their own married lives. Thus, the closeness of the relationship between adolescent boys and their stepfathers may be crucial both in helping adolescent boys adjust to experiencing a divorce and in helping them have faith in marriage and its promises of longevity.

An additional goal of the study was to explore gender differences. In accordance with social learning theory, we expected to find a stronger effect for fathers and boys than fathers and girls. Our findings lend partial support for this hypothesis because we did not find any effects for girls, and we found more effects for fathers and sons than mothers and sons. That is, we found one link between the mother-son relationship and adolescent boy’s attitudes toward marriage. We did not consider noncustodial mothers or stepmothers in this study because our sample did not allow such analyses. Thus, we do not know whether a mother-son or a mother-daughter effect might exist in those instances. Future research should investigate the role of noncustodial mothers and stepmothers and their influence on adolescents’ marital attitudes.
Since boys are socialized to be more autonomous and non-expressive as a part of the masculine gender role, a close parent-adolescent relationship may foster more positive attitudes toward intimacy in adult romantic relationships for boys. In contrast, since girls are socialized to be more interpersonal and nurturing as a part of the feminine gender role and to see the role of wife and mother as a more central part of their adult lives, a close parent-adolescent relationship may not be necessary to promote positive attitudes about marriage (Cooper & Grotevant, 1987). In other words, because adolescent girls generally feel more positively about marriage and the role of wife and mother as a result of their socialization, parents are less likely to influence girls’ attitudes than boys’ attitudes. Others have found intimacy to be correlated with family tolerance for separateness in women and family cohesion in men (Feldman et al., 1998). Specifically, adolescent boys and girls who report more intimacy in their relationships also come from families that encourage bonding in males and separateness in females, respectively. Adolescents growing up in these types of families may not be socialized according to typical male and female stereotypes. Taken together, one might expect that closeness in parent-adolescent relationships would predict boys’ attitudes toward marital relationships more so than girls. For girls, other mechanisms such as an ability to remain independent in parent-adolescent relationships may better predict their attitudes toward marital relationships. Future research should explore this possibility.

Additionally, parent-adolescent relationships may not influence girls’ attitudes toward marital relationships because they have more role models of intimacy and marriage as the ideal in their environments than boys, especially in the media (Ward, 2002). Television programs, magazines, and even music depict women involved in social relationships, especially romantic relationships, more often within the context of marriage than men. Boys have fewer role models
of intimacy in their environment outside of their family. Hence, fathers may be especially important as role models of interpersonal skills for boys. In fact, fathers who foster close father-son relationships have sons who are more open to intimacy in relationships (Werrbach, Grotevant, & Cooper, 1992). Furthermore, social learning theory suggests that fathers who model happiness in their marital relationships should influence their sons’ ideas about marriage. If so, positive expectations about marriage could result from a positive emotional situation at home in which a father models a happy marriage. We examined the possibility that closeness might be a reflection of a happy home life or marital satisfaction; however, we did not find this to be true in our sample. Closeness to a parent seems to be unique from living in a happy home environment.

Conclusion

In the current study, the closeness of adolescents’ relationships with their parents—especially fathers—was examined as a predictor of adolescents’ attitudes toward marital relationships. Our analyses lend support to the hypothesis that the closeness of the father-adolescent relationship influences boys’ attitudes toward marriage and divorce for biological custodial fathers, biological noncustodial fathers, and stepfathers over time. Boys who feel close to their fathers—regardless of custodial or biological status—hold more positive attitudes toward marriage and a lower likelihood of divorcing in the future. Social learning theorists and attachment theorists have both posited that fathers who act as role models and who have close relationships with their sons transmit positive messages to them, which in turn, should lead their sons to develop more positive attitudes toward marriage.

A major strength of this study is that it is longitudinal in nature. Few studies have investigated such factors in relation to adolescents’ attitudes toward marital relationships, and
even fewer studies have examined these factors using a longitudinal design. Nevertheless, although longitudinal studies allow for the opportunity to examine potentially causal processes better than cross-sectional research, causal conclusions cannot be drawn from these findings because the study is not experimental in nature. Attrition is another issue of concern in the present study. Although this is a problem common to nearly all longitudinal studies, it is an issue that warrants further consideration because it may limit our interpretation of the data as well as the generalizability of the findings.
References


adolescents: Family structure and parent-adolescent relationship as protective factors.


Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Major Study Variables.*

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<th>Variables</th>
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Table 2

Predicting Youths’ Attitudes Toward Marital Relationships Over Time from the Closeness of the Mother-Adolescent Relationship

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Note. *\(p < .05\), **\(p < .01\), ***\(p < .001\), +\(p < .10\). 1=African American, 2=European American; 1=Males, 2=Females.
Table 3

*Predicting Youths' Attitudes Toward Marital Relationships Over Time from the Closeness of the Father-Adolescent Relationship*

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Note. *p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001, + p < .10. 1=African American, 2=European American; 1=Males, 2=Females.
Table 4

**Predicting Adolescents' Attitudes Toward Marital Relationships Over Time as a Function of the Custodial Status of the Father**

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### Attitudes Toward Divorce (Wave 5)

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*Note.* \(^*\) \( p < .05 \), \(^{**}\) \( p < .01 \), \(^{***}\) \( p < .001 \), \( + p < .10 \). 1=African American, 2=European American; 1=Males, 2=Females. 1=Custodial Biological Fathers, 2=Nonecustodial Biological Fathers.
Table 5

Predicting Adolescents' Attitudes Toward Marital Relationships Over Time as a Function of the Biological Status of the Father

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(table continues)
## Parental Influence

### Attitudes Toward Divorce (Wave 5)

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### Note

*p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001, + p < .10. 1=African American, 2=European American; 1=Males, 2=Females. 1=Biological Nondivorced Fathers, 2=Stepfathers.
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Adolescents’ attitudes toward marriage as a function of the closeness of the biological mother-adolescent relationship.

Figure 2. Adolescents’ attitudes toward marriage as a function of the closeness of the biological father-adolescent relationship.

Figure 3. Adolescents’ attitudes toward divorce as a function of the closeness of the biological father-adolescent relationship.

Figure 4. Adolescents’ attitudes toward divorce as a function of the closeness of the father-adolescent relationship for custodial and noncustodial fathers.

Figure 5. Adolescents’ attitudes toward marriage as a function of the closeness of the father-adolescent relationship for custodial and noncustodial fathers.

Figure 6. Adolescents’ attitudes toward marriage as a function of the closeness of the father-adolescent relationship for biological fathers and stepfathers.

Figure 7. Adolescents’ attitudes toward divorce as a function of the closeness of the father-adolescent relationship for biological fathers and stepfathers.

Figure 8. Adolescents’ attitudes toward divorce as a function of biological status and the gender of the adolescent.
Figure 1

Closeliness of the Mother - Adolescent Relationship

Attitudes Toward Marriage

Boys

Girls
Figure 2

Closeness of the Father-Adolescent Relationship

Attitudes Toward Marriage
Attitudes Toward Divorce

Figure 3

Closeness of the Father - Adolescent Relationship

- Girls
- Boys
Attitudes Toward Divorce

Figure 4

Closeness of the Father - Adolescent Relationship

Girls

Boys
Figure 5

Closest of the Fathers - Adolescent Relationship

Attitudes Toward Marriage

0.0

0.5

1.0

2.0

3.5

3.0

4.5

5.0

4.0
Figure 6

Closeress of the Father - Adolescent Relationship

Boys
Girls
Figure 8

Attitudes Toward Divorce

- Boys
- Girls

Father's Biological Status

- Biological
- Stepfather