Time, Gender, and Distrust: Why Couples Argue About Leisure

Heather Hill[*]

Northwestern University

September 26, 2003

Time, Gender, and Distrust: Why Couples Argue About Leisure

Abstract

This study uses a relatively large qualitative sample of new parents, both married and unmarried, to describe couple conflict about leisure time. Leisure is a common source of conflict that taps into fundamental and universal issues that parents face in reconciling their different responsibilities, priorities, and beliefs about parenthood. For some parents, conflict of this type is also heightened by deep-seated distrust and fear of infidelity, a largely unexplored topic in the literature. The findings provide insight into relationship issues facing unmarried and married parents and the services that will best support successful relationships and parenting practices.

Key Words: Time, Gender, Leisure, Infidelity, Unmarried Parents, Conflict

The study of how parenthood affects couple relationships is nearly a cottage industry in the social sciences. Despite more than forty years of multi-disciplinary research in this area, however, the literature lags far behind modern trends in family structure and parenting. Nearly all of the research in this area is on married couples, despite the fact that one-third of children in the U.S. are born to unmarried parents and two-fifths spend some time in such families (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Also, with some notable exceptions (Crohan, 1996; L. White & Edwards, 1990; L. K. White, Booth, & Edwards, 1986), studies on parenting and marital quality, especially those by psychologists using non-probability samples, have focused on understanding the experiences of white, middle-class couples. These sizeable gaps in the literature are particularly conspicuous now, at a time when relationship health and stability among low-income, unmarried parents is of great public interest.

As joyful as parenthood can be, it also brings numerous stressful changes that can strain parents' relationship with each other. With children come substantial increases in expenses, responsibilities, and logistical challenges, and a corresponding decrease in time for the parents to be alone as a couple and as individuals. In turn, these changes can work alone, or in tandem with pre-existing relationship issues to decrease communication and positive couple experiences. Having children often makes it more difficult to maintain the intimacy and emotional support the couple shared prior to the birth. In addition, many couples move toward a more traditional division of labor in the home when they become parents, increasing the potential for conflict about roles, responsibilities, and time (e.g. Belsky, 1985; Cowan & Cowan, 1992, 1995; L. K. White et al., 1986).

For the most part, we do not know how the experience of parenting and relationship dynamics differ for married versus cohabiting or dating couples, and for couples with more or less resources at their disposal. It seems reasonable to assume that the less stable the relationship, the more potential there is for it to be strained by parenthood. Also, low-income couples may not be able to purchase the services that middle-class couples use to reduce the demands of parenting and free up their own time (most importantly, child care).

This study takes advantage of a relatively large qualitative sample (embedded in a larger survey sample) of low- to middle-income new parents, both married and unmarried, to describe the prevalence and dimensions of an important source of couple conflict: leisure time. Theory on marital conflict and on the division of labor in the home, as well as a body of research on time use, suggest that leisure is likely to be a common source of disagreement among parents. Free time is an understudied topic but one that has direct relevance to several fundamental issues in couple relationships, including fidelity, intimacy, and equity.

My analysis speaks to the importance of using more diverse samples to study parenting and couple relationships. Data from a nationally-representative survey of new parents in large cities suggests that low socio-economic couples and those in less stable relationships are more likely to argue about leisure time. Qualitative interviews with a subset of these parents indicate that a substantial minority from varied backgrounds argue about leisure, but that the dimensions of this issue may differ by socio-economic and relationship status. Most commonly, arguments about time are fueled by divergent priorities about how free time is spent, and by inequitable responsibilities and expectations in the home. For some parents, particularly those in less stable relationships, these more mundane issues are amplified by distrust of their partner and an association between free time and infidelity.

While it has not been studied extensively, theory suggests that leisure time would be a common source of conflict among romantically-involved parents. Time is a natural battleground for parents because the responsibilities of parenthood generally result in the sacrifice of time and resources (both financial and emotional) as a couple and as individuals. This can be a particularly contentious issue if parents disagree about how to allot time between family, couple, and individual activities, or if the division of work and leisure time does not seem equitable to both parents.

How do Mothers and Fathers Experience Parenting Differently?

Research consistently shows that children negatively affect the marital relationship. Having a child is associated with an increase in marital conflict and a decrease in marital satisfaction, and the marital relationship does not "recover" fully until all children leave the home (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, 1995; Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, Wilson, & Tran, 2002; Walzer, 1998). Because research on the transition to parenthood has rarely tried to account for potential sources of selection bias (e.g. into the study or into parenthood), we do not know whether the relationship between children and marital satisfaction is casual. We do know, however, that the changes that couples face when they have children are numerous and, in many cases, stressful.

One of the most consistent findings in the literature on marital quality and parenting is that having children reinforces traditional gender roles in the home, placing a disproportionate amount of the work and responsibility of parenting on mothers (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, 1995; Cowan et al., 1985; Levy-Shiff, 1994; Walzer, 1998). In turn, this imbalance is associated with increased reports of couple conflict and marital dissatisfaction, particularly among women.

When it comes to having children, Rampage (2002) warns, "[e]quality cannot be taken for granted. Even those young couples who establish routines that equitably distribute burden…find that the arrival of children creates formidable pressures to fall back into more stereotypic…patterns (265)."

It is true that while gender norms in the U.S. and other Western industrialized countries have changed dramatically in the last 50 years, the actual division of labor in the home has changed much less. Women have entered the labor market at high rates, but they are also still responsible for the majority of household work (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Hochschild, 1989). Arlie Hoschschild (1989) coined the phrase "the second shift" to capture this double burden of working mothers.

The inequitable division of labor in the home appears to cause real problems in the relationships of parents. It turns out that who does what following the birth of a child is central to how parents feel about themselves and their marriage (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Levy-Shiff (1994) found, for instance, that paternal involvement with children—especially caregiving activities—was the strongest predictor among a host of personality, attitude, and family dynamic variables of lower levels of decline in marital satisfaction after the birth of a child. Gottman, whose work focuses on the *process* more than the *content* of couple conflict, nonetheless gives special attention in his writings to two common topics of conflict: sex and housework (1985). In fact, he draws a connection between the two by suggesting that women withhold sex in response to their dissatisfaction with the distribution of housework.

Not only do mothers and fathers experience the responsibilities of parenting differently, it has also been suggested that their expectations and beliefs about "good parenting" are quite different. A prevailing view of gender in the sociological literature, "doing gender," posits that

gender differences are not created and maintained through beliefs or the distribution of certain tasks, but through our daily interactions with other people who expect us to behave in conventional ways (Walzer, 1998; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Susan Walzer (1998) provides a thoughtful extension to this theory that suggests motherhood and fatherhood are constructed as parents "do parenting." Each parent, she argues, has specific ideas about what parents *should* do and think based on their own images of the "good mother" or "good father." These images can be quite different from each other and tend to reinforce traditional gender roles (often despite the wishes of the parents). Following the logic of "doing gender," each parent's expectations of the other, and the resulting, repeated interactions between parents, reproduce and institutionalize gender differences.

Is There a Gender Gap in Leisure?

If leisure time is conceptualized as the residual time left over after paid and unpaid work, it is a logical extension of the second shift perspective that working mothers would have less leisure time available to them than working fathers. Even for mothers who do not work in the labor force, the greater responsibility they take for organizing home life and leisure activities for others in the family may limit their ability to take time for themselves (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003; Nock & Kingston, 1989). Bittman and Wajcman (2000) refer to the hypothesis that women may experience less free time than men as the "gender gap in leisure."

Time use studies have carefully documented the proportion of paid and unpaid work for which parents are responsible. The few time use studies that directly examined leisure time have produced some evidence of a gender gap in leisure, although the size of the gap remains unclear (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003; Nock & Kingston, 1989). In a study of

more than 47,000 individuals in 10 countries, Bittman and Wajcman find that women are responsible for 70 percent or more of household labor, but work only slightly more total hours than men. They find a gender gap in leisure of 1 hour 26 minutes per week for all couples and 2 hours 41 minutes per week for married couples, which is statistically significant ($p<.05$) but not as large as the inequities in housework would have implied. A similar study using a sample of 1,132 American men and women shows a larger average gap, with men enjoying nearly 30 more minutes a day or 3 hours and 15 minutes a week (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). Both Bittman & Wajcman and Mattingly & Bianchi find some evidence that women are less likely to have "pure leisure" time that is not combined with or interrupted by housework, and to have adult leisure time separate from their children.

We can speculate that individuals and couples are happier and mentally healthier when they take time to relax and be relieved of responsibilities. Free time can provide much needed respite from paid and domestic work, during which adults replenish energy and enjoy non-work activities that enrich their lives. Leisure should also promote better parenting if it makes parents less stressed and more satisfied personally. Mattingly & Bianchi (2003) offer the insight that leisure time is also used to build relationships with family and friends that can act as important social support networks.

Unfortunately, very little empirical research has been conducted on how the presence, absence, and/or nature of leisure time affects parents, children, and family dynamics. Orthner (1975) tested the effect of joint, parallel, and individual leisure time on marital satisfaction in five six-year periods in the marriage, and found a positive relationship between joint leisure activities and marital satisfaction, particularly in the early years of marriage. In a replication, however, Holman & Jacquart (1988) contradicted these results and suggested that it was not the

magnitude or type of leisure activity that mattered but the level of communication during the leisure activity.

In sum, considerable theoretical and empirical work on marital relationships, the division of labor, and time use indicate that leisure is likely to be a contentious issue for many parents. We know very little, however, about the dynamics of non-marital relationships that involve children. There is mounting evidence from demographic research on cohabitation that married and cohabiting couples are dissimilar on many characteristics, and that cohabiters have less positive relationship outcomes (Booth & Booth, 1996; Thomson & Colella, 1992; Wilson & Daly, 2001). In all likelihood, these differences are both causal and the result of pre-existing characteristics of the couples that choose to cohabit (Axinn & Thornton, 1992). In addition, parent characteristics and relationship quality before the couple has a child have been shown to account for some part of how the couple experiences their relationship as parents (Cowan & Cowan, 1995). These findings are important because they suggest that couples in less stable relationships—for instance, those who are young, unmarried, or having an unplanned pregnancy—are at greater risk for having the birth of a child negatively affect their relationship.

<div align="center">METHOD</div>

Data

To understand the prevalence and dimensions of conflict about leisure, I examined data from the Time, Love, and Cash in Couples with Children Study (TLC3), a longitudinal qualitative study of low- to middle-income, ethnically-diverse new parents in New York, Chicago, and Milwaukee. The TLC3 data is being collected through joint and individual interviews with 75 couples shortly after the birth of a child, and when the child is one, two, and

four years old. The sample was selected randomly from all births in the three study sites, and then stratified and over sampled to produce a more balanced distribution by race and marital status.   The sample design excluded couples who were not romantically involved at the time of the birth. At the time of the TLC3 baseline couple interview, the TLC3 parents were all married to, cohabiting with, or visiting (dating but not co-residing) the other parent of their child.

The TLC3 study is well designed to examine couple conflict, and specifically conflict about time. One of the primary goals of the study is to better understand couple dynamics and the factors that affect relationship stability and break-up among low- to middle income couples. To this end, the TLC3 interview guide elicits rich detail on time use, the division of child care and household labor, parental expectations, and both positive and negative couple interactions. TLC3 interviewers use a guide of topics and suggested questions, but the 2-3 hour interviews are conversational and guided as much by the respondent as the interviewer.

TLC3 is nested in, and draws its sample from, the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, a longitudinal survey of 3600 unmarried and 1100 married new parents (couples) in 20 cities. The Fragile Families surveys collect information on each parent's living arrangement, employment, income, and perspective on the status and quality of the couple relationship at multiple time points after the birth of the child. When weighted, the Fragile Families data is representative of all new parents in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. (For more information on the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, visit the study website at: http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.asp.)

Together, the TLC3 and Fragile Families studies offer an unprecedented opportunity to combine rich qualitative data with survey and observational data to better understand couple dynamics, relationship trajectories, and father involvement.

Analysis

The analytic sample for this paper is the 121 TLC3 sample members who were romantically-involved (married, cohabiting, or visiting) at the time of the baseline couple interview and who completed a baseline individual interview. These 121 individuals represent 65 couples (because individual interviews were not conducted with both parents in a few cases). I use weighted data from the Fragile Families baseline survey to compare these 65 couples to parents of all births in large U.S. cities (Table 1). The differences between the analytic sample and the larger population reflect the sampling design of the TLC3 study. Parents in my analysis are more likely to be cohabiting and to be African-American than the full sample. The samples are similar, however, on age, education, and receipt of earnings from employment and income from public assistance.

(Table 1 about here)

The Fragile Families data also provide some insight into the importance of studying couple dynamics with samples that include married and unmarried parents, and parents of varied socio-economic statuses (Table 2). In general, both mothers' and fathers' reports indicate that couples in less stable relationships (cohabiting or visiting) and low-SES couples are more likely to have disagreed about time in the last month and less likely to have gone out for entertainment with their partner in the month before the survey. Most strikingly, unmarried and low-SES parents are twice as likely to distrust the opposite sex as are married and high-SES couples. Low-SES couples also hold more traditional gender norms than do high-SES couples. All of these things suggest that less advantaged, unmarried parents may argue more about leisure and related issues.

(Table 2 about here)

My analysis began with reading seven TLC3 baseline interview fields related to couple conflict and leisure time for each of the 121 sample members. For example, parents were asked to discuss their own and their partner's leisure time, including the amount of time each parent enjoys, how they spend that time, and how satisfied they are with the status quo. Respondents were also asked a serious of questions about areas of conflict in their relationships. My analysis relies primarily on individual- rather than couple-level data, because reports of conflict varied between parents and more details on conflict were provided during individual interviews.

Using the baseline interviews, I created a quantitative variable for leisure conflict and coded individuals as reporting no, some, or high conflict about leisure. Any mention of conflict about free time was sufficient criterion for "some conflict." I defined "high conflict" by an increased frequency and intensity both of the arguments themselves and of the descriptions of those arguments during the interview. Strong language—such as, "hate"—and reports of deceit or dishonesty were also often present in the high conflict respondent's discussions of leisure time. While this approach focused on gauging the level of conflict about leisure specifically, it is seems likely that my "high conflict" couples have more contentious relationships in general.

For those individuals who reported some or high conflict, I conducted narrative analysis from all three baseline interviews—the individual's, his/her partner's, and the couple's—to better understand the dimensions of this type of conflict. My qualitative coding scheme was developed iteratively and inductively through multiple readings of these fields. I used individual-level data to code for issues common to multiple respondents and those codes developed into the overarching themes presented in this paper.

RESULTS

The time that parents spend socializing or enjoying leisure activities is a common source of tension in the relationships of the romantically-involved TLC3 couples. Of the 121 individuals included in this analysis, two-fifths report at least some conflict about leisure time in their relationships (Table 3). Mothers and fathers reported this type of conflict at approximately the same rate, but it is most often (60 percent of the time) the mother's dissatisfaction with the father's leisure time away from home that defines the conflict. This scenario is reversed in some cases, and in others the dissatisfaction runs both ways.

While conflict about leisure is fairly prevalent, reports of high levels of conflict on this topic are not. Only 12 individuals in the sample described intense or frequent conflict about this issue. Most sample members did not describe leisure as the main source of friction in their relationship, but several individuals did describe conflict about leisure as a threat to the future of the relationship.

(Table 3 about here)

The more committed or stable the sample member's relationship status, the less likely they were to report conflict about leisure. Visiting sample members were the most likely to report this type of conflict (66%) and married ones the least (28%), with the cohabiting splitting the difference (44%). With only nine visiting individuals in this sample, it is hard to draw any firm conclusions about this finding. However, the differences on no conflict and on high conflict between married and visiting individuals are statistically significant (p<.05). In addition, a much larger proportion of visiting individuals described high levels of conflict on this topic. It is plausible that couples who are not living together fight more often about leisure because they cannot monitor each other's time or behavior. Alternatively, conflict about leisure might

contribute to relationships remaining less committed; or another factor, such as infidelity, might be responsible for both conflict and instability.

For those individuals who reported conflict on this topic, this analysis reveals that leisure time forms a confluence of three critical relationship issues: 1) the scarcity of time after the birth of a child, 2) gender differences in the expectations and experience of parenting, and 3) distrust and the fear of infidelity. The first two are issues common to all parents and are well documented in the literature on parenting and gender. The third, however, has not been described in past literature, perhaps because it is more common among unmarried couples who predominate in this sample, or because it has simply been missed by past researchers.

Finding and Balancing Time

Time is a precious commodity for parents. Most parents, no matter how stable their relationships and how plentiful their resources, have difficulty meeting all their responsibilities at home and at work and still finding time for themselves. Many couples in the TLC3 sample face circumstances that might aggravate this common problem, such as not having readily available child care, not living together, or having children with other partners. The transition to parenthood could be particularly rocky for younger, first-time parents, who are more likely to have had substantial free time and active social lives before they became parents and partners. TLC3 parents under the age of 25 were significantly more likely to report conflict about leisure than parents 25 and older.

Conflict about leisure most often arises because parents have different priorities and levels of satisfaction with the balance of time they spend as a family, a couple, and individuals. Among the 121 individuals in this sample, there is an unmistakable gender difference when it comes to the desired amount of time together as a couple. Many mothers wish for more couple

time and feel that by spending time with friends, fathers are implicitly devaluing the family and the couple relationship. Only a few fathers in the sample described needing more couple time, although quite a few talked about enjoying leisure activities with their partners. When fathers did talk about needing more couple time, they made more specific references to sex than did the mothers. This quote from a 22-year-old mother living with the father of her child in Milwaukee captures how differently she and her boyfriend prioritize time:

" [O]n weekends, he'll leave in the morning. He'll leave around eleven. Then he don't (get) back 'til twelve at night…[I say], 'on days that you off and I'm off, we need to be spending time (together).' He tells me, 'I work through Friday. I deserve, I need two days off, so I can kick it with my guys and stuff.'"

One young couple in a particularly tumultuous relationship argues frequently about the amount of time that the father spends with his cousin. It is clear from these comments, that the parents do not see eye-to-eye on this issue:

Mother: "Like I always feel that his cousin comes between us and he always wants to be with his cousin, never doing anything with me, and that's kinda how it is and he doesn't see it yet though."

Father: "[She] wants to spend a lot more time [together]. I try to spend as much time as I can, but sometimes, I need time to myself. You know, things that I want to do. Go by my friend's house…Sometimes she gets mad because I want to go over there and she want to do something [together]."

In this sample, the modal problem is of mothers feeling that fathers go out too often, but it is not the only scenario in which leisure time becomes a source of conflict. In just under 20 percent of the cases, fathers feel that their partners have overly active social lives. According to

one 35-year old father from New York, this is the primary problem in his relationship: "[T]he only thing that really gets, ticks me off like this…I come home and my girl's like hanging out (with her friends). Then I get real upset." His live-in girlfriend acknowledges this issue as well:

"Cause I've been staying out a little too much. It's like, when I go out in the day, I tend to take too long to find my way home (laughs). And he gets mad, and I can't blame him, cause he's in the house a lot and besides work, he doesn't go out, so it's not like it's not really fair. You know what I mean?"

While mothers tend to want more couple time, both mothers and fathers struggle with getting enough individual time away from the children. Many mothers say that they have no free time, or they describe using free time to do laundry or clean the house, activities not typically considered leisurely. A young Puerto Rican mother says, "the only time I get for myself is if I gotta do laundry (laughs). And I do that alone. That's when I take my SWEET TIME" (emphasis in transcript). Fathers may have more freedom, but many report having substantially altered the amount and type of leisure time they spend outside the home with the birth of the baby.

More than fathers, mothers in this study feel that responsible parenting requires sacrificing individual and couple leisure time. They talk about wanting the fathers to choose to stay home, to give them the freedom to go out, or to plan couple activities, even when they say they are unlikely to take them up on these activities. Not surprisingly, fathers express frustration with these seemingly contradictory messages. There seems to be some symbolic value for the mothers, however, in the asking or the offering. The following quotes from two mothers in their early 20s, each living with the father of her child, illustrate this issue:

"[H]e was gone all day Saturday. And I went out on Friday with my sister. And then Sunday I thought would be our time together. But he went to a friend's house…I wish he would've stayed home so we could've spent time together. He said, 'Well, if you would've told me then I wouldn't have gone.' Well, you wanted to go to your friend's house. I didn't want you to stay home and be grouchy all the time."

"Sometimes when he go out with friends, I get jealous, I want him to stay here with me but I go over and I tell him he can go with the boys cause he did spend most of the day with us…[and] I be wanting him to go out and do what he used to do before the baby even came. So he don't feel like he being pressured to do anything."

As these quotes suggest, mothers are looking for fathers to prioritize the relationship and the family, *without being asked or "pressured."* Even if the mothers do not take opportunities to go out by themselves or to do couple activities, the fathers' commitment to these things seems to communicate support, investment, and equal sharing of responsibilities. Other couples are more resigned to the loss of couple time that comes with having children. One father wished for more time with his wife, but said they did not conflict about the issue: "Cause now between the kids it's kind of impossible, you can't regulate your time, so. You have some constraints, somebody wakes up, somebody goes to sleep, somebody's crying, so." The couples in this sample are experiencing and coping in different ways with the limited time and energy leftover after work and parenting, which they can direct to caring for their relationship.

Gender and Parenting

Women and men bring very different expectations to the role of parenting, and they often have widely divergent experiences as mothers and fathers. The most noticeable difference among the TLC3 mothers and fathers is that mothers carry much more of the burden of child

care and other household work. Even extremely committed fathers (and there are many in this sample) rarely take on as much of the child care work as mothers, and so when they are not working they enjoy greater freedom for leisure activities. This is particularly true in the early months or years of a child's life, when mothers may be less likely to work outside the home. This can build resentment among mothers who feel trapped by their responsibilities at home. Here, two unmarried Milwaukee mothers capture those feelings:

> "We compromise a lot. I say, 'well, if you do go out, just don't go out all night, you have work tomorrow and we have stuff to do.' And a lot of times it will be fine, but he's doing it two or three nights in a row, every week, and that was just getting overwhelming, especially since I NEVER go out at all. My friends go out all the time."

> "Cause I don't like being at home like that. And even now…my fun thing to do is to go out and visit people, and that's still boring to me, because I'm used to going out, doing stuff.…I love roller-blading and doing stuff like that, so that kinda sucks, that part of it. Not going out really sucks, you know, *especially because he gets to do it* (italics added)."

Even when fathers care for their children, some mothers feel that they have to be there to assist or supervise. A mother living with her child's father complains:

> " [I] want him to feed him (the baby) more, and when he does feed him he doesn't let me relax because he'll say 'What should I do?'…And then he won't change the diaper either. He done it one time since he was born. So I don't get to take the rest."

Another mother says that her boyfriend calls her every twenty minutes when she is on her way home from work because he gets stressed out carrying for the baby alone all day.

Overall the data tells a consistent story of mothers as "caretakers" and fathers are "helpers." Not only are mothers doing most of the child- and house-related work, but they describe parenting as their ultimate responsibility, and as something fundamental to their identity. As these quotes illustrate, they perceive a difference between how they and the fathers of their children view parenting:

"He was like '…you dumped her (the baby) on me.' I was like 'excuse me, I didn't know that I would be like "dumping" her on you'…I'm with her all the time and I don't feel like she's dumped on me."

"If I was to go out (he'd say), 'take him with you.' That's him. When he go outside, he just go outside, I can't say 'well, take him with you.' I can't make him take him with him. But he can make me…if he say he ain't watching him, he isn't going to watch him."

From the perspective of these parents, there are some biological and logistical constraints to mothers continuing a social life after the birth of a child. Some mothers feel that they cannot leave the house for long periods of time, particularly to socialize, while they are breastfeeding. More than fathers, mothers also talk about being so tired at the end of the day that they do not have the energy to socialize or spend time with their partners. Several parents laughed about the fact that when they do find time to watch TV or a movie together, the mothers often fall asleep.

Finally, in order to spend time away from the child, parents also need to have a child care provider they trust and can afford. This is an issue for both parents, but as the quotes above suggest, mothers are more often the ones who take responsibility for the children while fathers go out socializing. When couples want to spend time together, they generally depend on grandparents and other family members to provide babysitting. Only one couple described

hiring a babysitter, but several remarked that not having the money to pay a babysitter kept them from going out.

Mothers also articulate strong ideas about what they consider "good parenting," and these ideas can preclude them from taking leisure time. Mothers conceptualize good parenting as prioritizing children over everything else, changing your lifestyle, and sacrificing some of the freedom you enjoyed before having a child. These are probably common sentiments among mothers and fathers generally, but the mothers in this sample believe that they must put off their own needs for relaxation, time alone, and time with their partner in order to be good parents. In some cases, mothers do not trust anyone else, sometimes not even the fathers, to do what they view as ultimately their own responsibility.

While fathers are often equally invested in the role of parenting, their view of that role does not seem to require sacrificing their own leisure time. Mothers desire more time to socialize and enjoy leisure time on their own, but they also feel that their partners are shirking the responsibilities of fatherhood when they go out with friends. One 23-year old mother who lives with the father of her child gets frustrated with the amount of time that the father spends with his friends. She says,

"And his way of dealing with stress is just going out and relaxing. And my way of dealing with stress is just getting everything done and finished. That's the way I was raised. Do everything you have to do first and then you go out."

Like several other TLC3 mothers, the mother describes her partner as "abandoning" her and his responsibilities when he goes out. Several fathers in these situations seemed to be fighting to maintain their autonomy under the stress of new responsibilities to the child and the

mother. One 18 year-old father in a visiting relationship with his child's mother explains his frustration:

"…And then I come home from work and I kind of change (clothes), 'E., I'm going out tonight for a couple hours.' And E. says, 'No you're not going out for a couple of hours.' Then I feel like I'm a little kid again, like I'm seventeen and I'm asking my mom, Can I go out with my friends…."

It is clear that the parents, particularly mothers, feel torn between the demands and joys of parenting and their own needs for time to relax and do non-parenting activities.

Distrust

Perhaps the most explosive aspect of leisure time is that it can be seen as an opportunity for infidelity. Nearly half of the mothers and fathers in this study that described arguing about leisure, and all of those who reported high levels of conflict about leisure, cited distrust as one of the key reasons for that conflict. In most cases, mothers distrust fathers, but there are also couples in which the fathers' jealousy or distrust is the major issue or in which the distrust runs both ways. If either parent is concerned about the other being sexually unfaithful, socializing with friends and other leisure activities outside the home can bring that problem quickly to the surface. Distrust appears to "up-the-ante" on conflict about leisure by connecting it with a highly emotional, contentious and relationship-threatening issue.

The severity of distrust varies among sample members. Some mother and fathers explicitly talked about having concerns that their partner would cheat on them based on past experience. Several others feel that their partner's friends or family are bad influences who interfere with the couple relationship and may encourage infidelity or other undesirable behavior. One 18-year mother's suspicion that the father will repeat past infidelities is a critical dimension

of their relationships and her frustration with the time he spends out of the house. In her own words:

"It's like he always gets to go out and do whatever he wants and I don't know what he's doing.…[w]hen we got back together, like a year ago, I always checked his pockets because I don't trust him AT ALL. I did it maybe for a month, then I gave him my trust back, you know. Then he came, or his cousin came to the house once in a car with two girls in it. Ever since I saw that car that day I just don't trust him. Maybe it's just in my head, or maybe it's not (capitalized words in transcript)."

In this and a few other severe cases, there is a long history of mutual distrust, dishonesty, and accusations in the relationship. Here a mother who lives with her child's father in New York City tells the story of a near breakup:

"I had went out a couple nights, and he told me, stop staying out, stop staying out late…After work I would got to after-hours [parties]. Stay out 'til like six, seven o'clock in the morning and he wasn't having it. And he was like, 'you better stop doing this shit to me, because I stay up and I worry about you…[One night] I snuck out and he locked the doors on me, and I tried to climb up the window and I fell. And I broke my leg in five places…but that brought us back together, because he had to keep coming to the hospital, he felt bad."

Her boyfriend describes his intense distrust of her, her friends and other men:

"There's certain girls that you [she] can't even hang out with as friends….You got to really keep a good eye on her , a really close eye for many reasons…That shit, for me I said, that line there, that's it…You know, some people, they're some guys they don't

care…I don't like to get played and to be taken for granted and stuff, especially when

I'm nice and I'm buying you earrings, and fucking jewelry."

This father admitted to sleeping with someone else while he was living with the mother of

his child. In his eyes, however, it was justified because it was only after the mother had

"played him dirty."

Like the mother in the story above, some parents contribute to a dynamic of distrust by

lying or putting themselves in situations that test their partner's ability to trust them. A 23 year-

old Milwaukee man described the following situation, seemingly unaware of his role in his

partner's distrust of him:

"As a matter of fact we just had a huge fight, this was huge. Some woman at work…I

don't know if she didn't know that I had a girlfriend or whatever, she dropped off her

number on my desk….I just disregarded it, I'm like, ok, whatever. Took it home, put

it in my drawer. All the sudden, I'm at work, I give [my girlfriend] a call to see how

things are going….All of the sudden she just started going nuts. She's like, 'Who the

hell is C.?"

A married father living in Chicago said, "There are nights where…I need to see my

players and this and that, and I don't tell her that. Every once in while, it depends, I do have

friends that have figured out the she might disapprove."

Of course, the "distrusted" parents generally feel that their partner's concerns are

unfounded, and that they should be able to go out, socialize, and interact with members of the

opposite sex without being suspected of infidelity. One mother says, "I just haven't been able to

do that things that I want to do…this guy spoke to me and it was like, 'Who's that? What is he

doing?!' You'd have thought the guy picked me up and ran off with me." Similarly, a father in

the sample describes his annoyance with the mother of his child picking up the phone while he is talking to his mother to check whether he is talking to another woman.

These stories suggest that jealousy and distrust are a serious threat to stable relationships, and can certainly make it less likely that cohabiting or visiting couples will make a stronger commitment to one another. The father who described fighting with his girlfriend about taking another woman's phone number said this when asked what would have to happen for him to marry the mother of his child:

> "From her, I want her to start understanding what we talked about before. About understanding parts of me. I want her to understand me more. I want her to come around a little bit, and give me a little bit more freedom…when we aren't going out and I'm taking home women and stuff like that. I don't want none of that, I just want to get out once in a while…."

Does Leisure Conflict Differ for Married and Unmarried Couples?

Based on previous research on couple dynamics and parenting, I suspected that the issues of balancing time and resolving gender differences would be common among couples in this sample, regardless of their relationship status. The high level of distrust, however, expressed by a smaller group of parents was surprising and previously undocumented in studies of married couples. It seems plausible that this finding is the result of including less stable relationship forms—specifically, cohabitation and visiting—in the analysis. Comparing the dimensions of leisure conflict for married and unmarried couples lends support to this supposition.

Balancing individual, couple, and family time is the most common issue surrounding couple conflict about free time, regardless of whether the individuals are in married, cohabiting, or visiting relationships. Gender differences in the experience of parenting, and particularly in

the division of labor in the household, affected the three sub-groups differently, but in no discernable pattern. When it comes to distrust, however, there are differences suggesting that the more committed the relationship, the less distrust is an issue. Two-fifths of married individuals described distrust as an issue in relation to leisure, compared to over half of the cohabiting individuals and more than two-thirds of the visiting couples. (Despite small cell sizes, the differences between the married and cohabiting sub-groups, and the married and visiting sub-groups, are significant at the $p < .05$ level.)

We cannot know from this study whether less committed relationships lead to more problems with infidelity and distrust or vice versa. Nevertheless, this finding suggests the importance of studying couple relationships with samples of both married and unmarried individuals, and of exploring the prevalence, importance, and implications of infidelity.

DISCUSSION

Leisure is a common source of conflict for couples in this sample because it taps into several core and contentious relationship issues—time, equity, and trust. The time and equity issues have been well documented in the literature on parenting and appear to cause problems for couples of different backgrounds and in different types of relationships. In fact, my analyses show that these issues were equally likely to come up, in the context of conflict about leisure, for the unmarried and married parents in this study.

The finding of high levels of distrust among the parents in this sample, particularly the unmarried parents, is most noteworthy. Distrustful parents view the free time their partners spent outside the home as an opportunity for deceit and betrayal. This fear may or may not be based on past experiences with infidelity. This issue has not been discussed in previous research and it

may be directly related to the ways in which cohabiting and visiting couples differ from married couples. Distrust was a particularly salient issue for unmarried parents. Fully 60 percent of unmarried individuals reported distrust in the course of discussing conflict about leisure time. In analyses not presented here of all 75 couples in the TLC3 study, 10 percent of married couples and 30 percent of unmarried couples reported sexual infidelity by the mother or the father, or both, sometime in the course of the relationship. There can be little doubt that distrust poses a considerable challenge, and for some an insurmountable hurdle, to relationship stability and even to successful co-parenting if the couple relationship were to dissolve.

These findings contribute to the current public and scholarly discussion about the relationship dynamics and outcomes of unmarried parents. States and localities have already begun to develop and implement programs to teach relationship skills and encourage unmarried parents in healthy relationships to wed.   Interventions have also been designed for couples that do not stay romantically involved in order to promote cooperative parenting, or co-parenting. The Bush Administration has plans to support and expand these efforts with $1.5 billion in federal monies over the next five years.

This study and other similar research can provide insight for policy-makers and program administrators into the issues that face married and unmarried parents, and the services that will best support healthy, committed relationships and high quality parenting. This study begins to address the lack of research that has been conducted on parenting and couple dynamics among unmarried couples of different socio-economic and racial backgrounds. Despite the lack of research in this area, there has been great speculation that for lower-income parents, financial problems create the largest barrier to relationship stability and ultimately to marriage. This study does not provide evidence to support or refute this hypothesis; instead, it points out some

important *non-financial* relationship issues that create conflict and instability for many parents.

Programs aimed at building strong relationships among unmarried parents would do well to

consider and attempt to address these issues.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Demographic Characteristics of the Fragile Families and Qualitative Study Samples

	Weighted Fragile Families Sample[a] (N=4898 couples)	Qualitative Analysis Sample (N=65 couples)
Relationship Status at Baseline (mother's report)		
Married	.561 (.246)	.375 (.234)
Cohabiting	.225 (.174)	.500 (.25)
Visiting (dating)	.138 (.118)	.125 (.109)
Non-romantic	.076 (.070)	0[b] (0)
Age		
Mother's age	26.6 (6.23)	25.4 (5.31)
Father's age	29.4 (7.35)	27.5 (5.35)

Race

Mother's race

Black	.284	.436
	(.203)	(.246)
White	.466	.258
	(.249)	(.191)
Other	.250	.306
	(.188)	(.212)
Mother is Hispanic	.331	.359
	(.221)	(.230)

Father's race

Black	.282	.492
	(.202)	(.250)
White	.487	.164
	(.250)	(.137)
Other	.231	.344
	(.178)	(.226)
Father is Hispanic	.330	.429
	(.221)	(.245)

Education and Income

Mother has less than HS diploma	.302	.234
	(.211)	(.179)

Father has less than HS diploma	.276	.266
	(.200)	(.195)
Mother had earnings from work in last year	.720	.781
	(.202)	(.171)
Mother had income from public assistance in last year	.260	.281
	(.192)	(.202)

Source: Baseline Fragile Families data collected in 2000.

Notes:

[a] Means and standard deviations for the Fragile Families sample are weighted to represent all births in 77 U.S. Cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information on the weighting procedure, see: Vu, Thu. (2003) Sample Weight Construction for the Fragile Families Baseline Survey. A *Methodology Report*. Princeton, NJ: Center for Health and Wellbeing, Princeton University, August.

[b] Couples not romantically involved at the time of the baseline Fragile Families survey were excluded from the TLC3 sampling frame.

Table 2. Select Fragile Families Survey Responses Related to Conflict, Time, Gender, and Distrust, by Relationship and Socio-Economic Statuses (standard deviations in parenthesis)[a]

	Relationship Status			SES[b]	
	Visiting	Cohabiting	Married	Low	High
Mother Report					
1. In last month, disagreed about spending time	.600 (.240)	.477 (.249)	.424 (.244)	.488 (.250)	.447 (.247)
2. In last month, went out for entertainment with father of child	.558 (.247)	.679 (.218)	.678 (.218)	.569 (.245)	.686 (.215)
3. Men should earn money and woman should care for family	.277 (.200)	.328 (.220)	.393 (.239)	.476 (.249)	.277 (.200)
4. Men cannot be trusted to be faithful	.238 (.181)	.135 (.117)	.103 (.092)	.246 (.185)	.082 (.075)
Father Report					
1. In last month, disagreed about spending time	.640 (.230)	.495 (.250)	.449 (.247)	.470 (.249)	.490 (.250)
2. In last month, went out for entertainment with father of child	.684 (.216)	.674 (.220)	.684 (.216)	.606 (.239)	.710 (.206)
3. Man should earn money and woman	.389	.417	.463	.584	.346

should care for family	(.238)	(.243)	(.249)	(.243)	(.226)
4. Women cannot be trusted to be faithful	.150	.110	.057	.160	.042
	(.128)	(.010)	(.054)	(.134)	(.040)
N=	1274	1784	1187	2237	2660

Source: Baseline Fragile Families data collected in 2000.

Notes:

[a] All means and standard deviations have been weighted to represent all births in 77 U.S. Cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information on the weighting procedure, see: Vu, Thu. (2003) Sample Weight Construction for the Fragile Families Baseline Survey. A *Methodology Report*. Princeton, NJ: Center for Health and Wellbeing, Princeton University, August.

[b] Low-SES is defined as either parent (or both parents) having less than a high school diploma.

Table 3. Individual Reports of Conflict about Leisure

	No conflict	Some conflict	High conflict	Total
Gender				
Female	36 (57%)	22 (35%)	5 (8%)	63 (100%)
Male	38 (66%)	13 (22%)	7 (12%)	58 (100%)
Relationship Status				
Married	40 (74%)	10 (19%)	4 (8%)	54 (100%)
Cohabiting	31 (54%)	21 (37%)	5 (9%)	57 (100%)
Visiting	3 (30%)	4 (40%)	3 (30%)	10 (100%)
Total	74 (61%)	35 (29%)	12 (10%)	121 (100%)

Source: TLC3 baseline individual interviews.

Note: Fisher's exact tests (chi-squared for cells with n<5) show no significant relationship between gender or relationships status and conflict on leisure score. Only the differences between the married and visiting sub-samples on no conflict and high conflict are statistically significant (p<.05) in t-tests for two independent samples.

REFERENCES

Axinn, W. G., & Thornton, A. (1992). The Relationship between Cohabitation and Divorce: Selectivity or Causal Influence? *Demography, 29*(3), 357-374.

Belsky, J. (1985). Exploring Individual Differences in Marital Change across the Transition to Parenthood: The Role of Violated Expectations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 47*(4), 1037-1044.

Bittman, M., & Wajcman, J. (2000). The Rush Hour: The Character of Leisure Time and Gender Equity. *Social Forces, 79*(1), 165-189.

Booth, S. L., & Booth, A. (1996). Cohabitation versus Marriage: A Comparison of Relationship Quality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 58*(3), 668-678.

Bumpass, L., & Lu, H.-H. (2000). Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the United States. *Population Studies, 54*, 29-41.

Cowan, C. P., & Cowan, P. A. (1992). *When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples*. New York: Basic Books.

Cowan, C. P., & Cowan, P. A. (1995). Interventions to Ease the Transition to Parenthood: Why They Are Needed and What They Can Do. *Family Relations, 44*(4), 412-423.

Cowan, C. P., Cowan, P. A., Heming, G., Garrett, E., Coysh, W. S., Harriet, C.-B., et al. (1985). Transitions to Parenthood: His, Hers, and Theirs. *Journal of Family Issues, 6*(4), 451-481.

Crohan, S. E. (1996). Marital Quality and Conflict Across the Transition to Parenthood in African American and White Couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 58*(4), 933-944.

Hochschild, A. R. (1989). *The Second Shift*. New York: Avon Books.

Holman, T. B., & Jacquart, M. (1988). Leisure-Activity Patterns and Marital Satisfaction: A Further Test. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 50*(1), 69-77.

Levy-Shiff, R. (1994). Individual and Contextual Correlates of Marital Change Across the Transition to Parenthood. *Developmental Psychology, 30*(4), 591-601.

Mattingly, M. J., & Bianchi, S. M. (2003). Gender Differences in the Quantity and Quality of Free Time: The U.S. Experience. *Social Forces, 81*(3), 999-1030.

Nock, S. L., & Kingston, P. W. (1989). The Division of Leisure and Work. *Social Sciences Quarterly, 70*(1), 24-39.

Orthner, D. K. (1975). Leisure Activity Patterns and Marital Satisfaction over the Marital Career. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 37*(1), 91-102.

Rampage, C. (2002). Marriage in the 20th Century: A Feminist Perspective. *Family Process, 41*(2), 261-268.

Simpson, J. A., Rholes, W. S., Campbell, L., Wilson, C., & Tran, S. (2002). Adult Attachment, the Transition to Parenthood, and Marital Well-Being. In P. Noller & J. A. Feeney (Eds.), *Understanding Marriage: Developments in the Study of Couple Interaction* (pp. 385-410). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thomson, E., & Colella, U. (1992). Cohabition and Marital Stability: Quality or Commitment? *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54*(2), 259-267.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, C. f. D. C. a. P. (2003). Births: Preliminary Data for 2002. *National Vital Statistics Report, 51*(11).

Veroff, J., Douvan, E., Orbuch, T. L., & Acitelli, L. K. (1998). Happiness in Stable Marriages: The Early Years. In T. N. Bradbury (Ed.), *The Developmental Course of Marital Dysfunction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walzer, S. (1998). *Thinking about the Baby: Gender and Transitions into Parenthood*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Ward, R. A. (1993). Marital Happiness and Household Equity in Later Life. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 55*(2), 427-438.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender & Society, 1*(2), 125-151.

White, L., & Edwards, J. N. (1990). Emptying the Nest and Parental Well-Being: An Analysis of National Panel Data. *American Sociological Review, 55*(2), 235-242.

White, L. K., Booth, A., & Edwards, J. N. (1986). Children and Marital Happiness: Why the Negative Correlation? *Journal of Family Issues, 7*(2), 131-147.

Wilson, M., & Daly, M. (2001). The Evolutionary Psychology of Couple Conflict in Registered versus De Facto Marital Unions. In A. Booth, A. C. Crouter & M. Clements (Eds.), *Couples in Conflict* (pp. 3-26). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.