

Happily Ever After? Religion, Marital Status, Gender, and Relationship Quality in Urban Families

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that religious participation is correlated with marital satisfaction. Less is known about whether religion also benefits participants in nonmarital, intimate relationships, or whether religious effects on relationships vary by gender. Using data from the first three waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, we find that religious participation by fathers, irrespective of marital status, is consistently associated with better relationships among new parents in urban America; however, mothers' participation is not related to relationship quality. These results suggest that religious effects vary more by gender than they do by marital status. We conclude that men's investments in relationships would seem to depend more on the institutional contexts of those relationships, such as participation in formal religion, than do women's investments.

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INTRODUCTION

The last four decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in family diversity (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Ellwood and Jencks 2004; Ventura *et al.* 2000). Consequently, many children in the United States do not live in a married two-parent household. One third of all children are now born outside marriage, approximately 40 percent of all children will experience cohabiting parents, and an estimated 50 percent of all children will spend time living in a single-parent or stepfamily household (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Moffit and Rendall 1995; Ventura *et al.* 2000).

Family diversity is especially prevalent among minority and poor and working-class families with children in urban America; in these communities, the majority of children are born outside of wedlock (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; McLanahan 2005; Ventura *et al.* 2000). Many of these children are born into “fragile families” where unmarried parents are romantically involved and raising their children together (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004). Consequently, the vast majority of urban American children are born into a married household or a fragile family, where the parents either cohabit or visit one another regularly (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001). Put another way, most urban children are born into families where both of their parents are in some type of intimate relationship.

Religious institutions have historically played a central role in shaping the character and quality of intimate relationships between married parents (Christiano 2000). But despite the diversity of family types in contemporary America, recent research on religion and relationship quality has focused only on married relationships. Religion influences marital quality directly by fostering a range of relationship-related values, norms, and social supports, which in turn promote greater investments in the marriage, discourage behavior harmful to the marriage, and encourage spouses to take a favorable view of their relationship (Christiano 2000; Wilcox 2004). Religion also has an indirect effect on marriage: religious beliefs and practice tend to promote psychological well-being, prosocial norms, and social support among partners, all of which are linked to better marriages (Ellison 1994; Gottman 1998; Amato and Booth 1997). Accordingly, most studies indicate that religious practice is associated with higher levels of marital quality (Call and Heaton 1997; Christiano 2000; Greeley 1991; Wilcox 2004; M. Wilson and Filsinger 1986; but see Booth *et al.* 1995).

But no research has determined if religious practice is associated with higher relationship quality among unmarried couples; moreover, recent research on urban families has largely overlooked the influence of religion (e.g., Edin and Kefalas 2005). Indeed, our research suggests that a large minority of married and unmarried urban families are religious. We estimate that 34 percent of unmarried mothers, 26 percent of unmarried fathers, 48 percent of married mothers, and 43 percent of married fathers attend church regularly (defined as several times a month or more). The emphasis that many religious traditions place on marriage as the ideal site for sex and childbearing, and the stigma that religious groups have traditionally accorded to nonmarital childbearing, extramarital sex, and cohabitation (Christiano 2000; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992; Thornton 1985), suggest that unmarried parents who are active churchgoers may not get normative and social support for nonmarital, romantic relationships. Instead, they may be sanctioned for such relationships. On the other hand, unmarried parents’ relationships may still benefit indirectly from the social and psychological support provided by religious participation, as well as the emphasis that many urban congregations place on caring and responsible behavior, and avoiding the lure of the street (Ammerman 1997; Anderson 1999; McRoberts 2003). One of the central aims of this study is to determine if religious participation is associated with higher quality relationships among both married *and* unmarried parents in urban America.

Research on religion and marriage also suggests that men's relationship behavior is influenced more by the institutional contexts of their unions than women's relationship behavior (Nock 1998; Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004; Wilcox 2004). Men seem to be motivated more than women to invest in relationships embedded in institutional contexts—such as marriage and religion—that both stress the importance of long-term commitments and accord status to individuals who invest in their relationships (Nock 1998; Wilcox 2004). The effect of religious participation may be particularly powerful for married fathers, insofar as these men are integrated into two institutional contexts—marriage and religion—that stress the importance of long-term commitment.

We use longitudinal data from the first three waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001) to determine whether the relationship between religious participation and union quality varies by sex and marital status. These questions are noteworthy for two reasons. First, religious institutions are important civic actors in urban America, yet we know little about how they are doing in reaching out to the growing number of fragile families, families who have traditionally been shamed or shunned by these institutions (Ellingson 2004). Second, because parental relationship quality is of paramount importance for the well-being of children (Amato and Booth 1997; Carlson and McLanahan 2006), the effects of religious participation—especially any differential effects for married and unmarried parents—on the quality of the parental relationship may have important implications for the well-being of children growing up in urban families.

RELIGION AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Because of their proximity to one another in the private sphere and because of their common focus on morality and primary relationships, the institutions of religion and the family have maintained substantial ties throughout much of U.S. history (Edgell 2003; Pankhurst and Houseknecht 2000; Thornton 1985). As Berger (1967: 373) observed, “The family is the institutional arena in which traditional religious symbols continue to have the most relevance in actual everyday living. In turn, the family has become for most religious institutions the main ‘target area’ for their social strategy.”

The link between these two institutions is manifested, among other places, in the relationship between religion and marriage. Religious institutions have long endowed the marital vow with a sense of sacredness. In particular, the three largest religious traditions in our nation's cities—Roman Catholicism, Black Protestantism, and conservative Protestantism—view marriage as a covenantal relationship that mirrors the relationship between Christ and the church (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007). Accordingly, the relationship between husband and wife is supposed to be marked by mutual, sacrificial service and by high levels of affection. Furthermore, marriage is held to be the only legitimate arena for sexuality and childbearing, both because sex outside marriage is viewed as sinful and because children are thought to deserve two parents who are committed to childrearing and to one another (Browning *et al.* 1997: 219-246).

Marriage is valued even in urban congregations, where many congregants are living in households that do not conform to the family ideals of these traditions. That is, the vast majority of Black Protestant, Catholic, and conservative Protestant congregations in urban America stress marriage as the best arena for sex, childbearing, and childrearing, despite the fact that these congregations often have large numbers of single-parent and fragile families in their midst (Ellingson *et al.* 2004; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007). (In contrast, mainline Protestant churches in urban America tend to celebrate family pluralism and downplay the normative link between marriage and sex [Ellingson *et al.* 2004; Wilcox 2002]). For instance, Wallace Charles Smith, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., writes, “God's revelation clearly points to male-female monogamous [marital] relationships as the gift by God to humankind for the purposes of procreation and nurturing. Even for people of African descent, this concept of monogamy must be at the heart of even the extended family structure” (Smith 1985: 70). Partly because of their normative support for marriage, urban congregations tend to attract a disproportionate share of married families from the urban neighborhoods in which they reside, even though they also have their share of single-parent and fragile families (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007).

Religion, Marital Status, and Relationship Quality

Because of their practical and symbolic dependence on a traditional model of the family institutionalized early in the twentieth century, and “despite vast differences in official family ideology,” most churches in the U.S. focus the bulk of their preaching, teaching, and pastoral programming on families headed by married couples (Edgell 2003: 167). The strong normative and social ties linking the institutions of religion and marriage suggest that religion may have positive effects on married parents but not necessarily unmarried parents in urban America. Specifically, the literature on religion and family suggests that the beliefs, norms, rituals, and social networks associated with urban churches should foster high-quality marriages more than high-quality relationships among couples in fragile families.

Religious institutions promulgate a range of beliefs related to marriage, emphasizing its sanctity and the importance of lifelong fidelity (Wilcox 2004). These beliefs tend to reinforce a long-term and institutional rather than short-term and contractual view of the marital relationship. This long-term view, in turn, is associated with greater investments of time and affection in the marital relationship by both spouses for at least four reasons (Amato and Rogers 1999; Brines and Joyner 1999; Nock 2001).

First, insofar as spouses take the long view and remain committed to their marriages, they are less likely to pursue alternative partners and thus are more likely to invest in the spouse with whom they envision spending the rest of their lives (Wilcox 2004). Spouses with confidence in the future of their marriage are more likely to overlook current problems in their relationship because they can anticipate a time when these problems will have abated (Nock 2001). Couples who share a strong commitment to marriage benefit from a sense of emotional security and trust, qualities that often foster an upward cycle of mutual investment (Brines and Joyner 1999; Wilcox 2004). In sum, by endowing marriage with a sense of sacredness and permanence, religious institutions may increase the investments that urban parents make to their marriages and reduce their expectations for immediate gratification. This should result in higher reports of relationship satisfaction.

Second, religious institutions foster specific marriage-related norms—such as sexual fidelity, affection, and forgiveness—that can help couples build commitment, avoid unnecessary conflict, and deal with their disagreements constructively (Greeley 1991; Wilcox 2004). For instance, adultery can lead to divorce (Amato and Rogers 1997). In part because most religions proscribe sex outside marriage, religious spouses are less likely to commit adultery (Call and Heaton 1997; Laumann *et al.* 1994). Accordingly, they may be less likely to experience the destructive conflict and upheaval associated with adultery (Paik, Laumann, and Van Haitsma 2004). Likewise, the emphasis churches place on affection and forgiveness in marriage may foster emotional investment and constructive approaches to solving marital conflicts, both of which are highly predictive of relationship satisfaction (Gottman 1998; McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen 2000). For instance, churchgoing couples experience less domestic violence (Ellison, Bartkowski, and Anderson 1999). Religious support for these norms could be particularly important in urban communities where sexual infidelity, domestic violence, and fractious gender relations often harm intimate relationships (Youm and Paik 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2005).

Third, the rituals associated with church attendance may increase married parents’ commitment to marriage norms and their sense of solidarity with one another (Durkheim 1995; Mahoney *et al.* 2003). Family religious rituals—such as religious weddings, infant baptisms, baby dedications—and other congregational worship rituals provide opportunities for married couples to experience their relationship as sacred, to see their relationship as powerful, and to associate marriage-related norms with a transcendent “moral power to which they are subject and from which they receive what is best in themselves” (Durkheim 1995: 226-227; Mahoney *et al.* 2003; Pearce and Axinn 1998). In other words, religious rituals may provide married parents in urban America with strength, meaning, and direction when it comes to navigating the opportunities and challenges of married life.

Fourth and finally, religious institutions embed couples in marriage-oriented social networks that can strengthen marital relationships by providing social support and by reinforcing marriage-related norms (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995; Wilcox 2004). These social networks monitor marital

behavior, and may discourage extramarital sexual activity and domestic violence (Youm and Paik 2004). They also offer social support to couples facing relationship problems or other difficulties. They provide status rewards (e.g., praise and public recognition) to spouses who invest themselves in their marriages and families. Furthermore, these marriage-oriented religious networks can provide models of good relationships to young couples who are struggling to make their marriages work. The ethnographic literature on urban families suggests that these networks play an important role in supporting marriages in communities where married families are relatively rare and face many challenges—from poverty to discrimination to an unhealthy relationship culture. As Furstenberg (2001: 242) observes, “[C]onventional notions of marriage are often carried forward [among the urban poor] within families actively involved in religious institutions and part of a broader religious community.”

Unmarried couples may be less likely to benefit from the marriage-related beliefs, norms, rituals, and social networks associated with religious institutions. Urban parents who are not married may be less likely to associate religious beliefs and rituals about marriage with their own relationships. Religious norms proscribing sexual infidelity may be less powerful for this group, insofar as these norms are linked specifically to marriage. Furthermore, marriage-oriented social networks found in most churches may not extend social and normative support to unmarried parents, given that they are living a lifestyle that contradicts doctrinal teachings. Indeed, it is quite possible that unmarried couples will be stigmatized or otherwise made to feel uncomfortable if they seek to maintain their romantic relationship in open opposition to the norms of their congregation (Edgell 2006; Ellingson 2004). Edgell (2006: 56), for instance, has found that parents in nontraditional families are less likely to report feeling that they “fit in” at most churches. For all these reasons, unmarried parents in urban America in a romantic or cohabiting relationship may be less likely to benefit from the range of marriage-oriented beliefs, rituals, norms, and networks associated with urban churches.

Nevertheless, it is possible that religion exerts a generically positive effect on unmarried and married parental relationships. Religious institutions typically promulgate pro-social norms regarding care and consideration. They also offer practical and psychological support to their members that may foster higher-quality relationships among urban parents, regardless of their marital status. Religious norms that stress the importance of caring and forgiveness may lead to more supportive behavior and better relationships among all urban parents (Ammerman 1997). Likewise, the normative stress that urban churches place on “decent” living—e.g., working hard, avoiding alcohol and drug abuse, and steering clear of the street—may also help urban parents avoid problematic behavior that threatens relationships (Anderson 1999; McRoberts 2003).

The practical and emotional support that many churches offer to their members regardless of family status may also be valuable to unmarried couples. For instance, many congregations offer members low-cost childcare, job training or employment leads, or financial aid—all of which can be helpful to couples, especially low-income couples, regardless of their marital status (Edgell 2006; McRoberts 2003). Religious belief and practice are also associated with lower levels of psychological distress and higher levels of psychological well-being, even in the face of stressful conditions like poverty and discrimination (Ellison *et al.* 2004). Specifically, religious belief can help individuals make sense of challenges, while religious institutions offer social support to individuals in stressful situations. Since stress is a major source of relationship problems (Conger *et al.* 1990; Rook, Dooley, and Catalano 1991), the protective social psychological functions of religious participation may be linked to higher-quality relationships for married and unmarried couples.

Religion, Gender, and Relationship Quality

The effects of religion on relationships may also vary by gender. Recent research on marriage and cohabitation suggests that men’s relationship behavior, more than women’s, is shaped by institutional contexts (Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004). Unlike men, women tend to be committed to their romantic relationships regardless of their marital status. This may be in part because society socializes women, more so than men, to focus on relationships (Maccoby 1998; Strazdins and Broom 2004;

Thompson and Walker 1989). In contrast, men have fewer institutional influences pushing them to focus on relationships.

But marriage appears to be one such influence. In particular, the symbolic meaning men accord to marriage, the norms associated with marriage, and the status rewards associated with following those norms—i.e., being a good husband—appear to encourage higher levels of commitment, sacrifice, and affection in intimate relationships among men more than among women (Nock 1998; Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004; Whitton, Stanley, and Markman 2002). For instance, Durkheim argues that marriage, via norms regarding sexual fidelity, “regulates the life of passion” and “closes the horizon” by “forcing a man to attach himself forever to the same woman;” in so doing, marriage makes it man’s “duty to find happiness in his lot” (Durkheim 1951: 270). Indeed, Wilson’s (1996) work suggests that this dynamic exists among the urban poor, where urban men associate marriage with growing up, settling down, and being accountable to one’s partner (men sometimes steer clear of marriage for this very reason). Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Carlson and McLanahan (2006) find that married fathers in urban America are more supportive and less likely to engage in conflict with their partners than are unmarried fathers.

Religion is another institution that encourages men to focus on family life (Edgell 2006; Wilcox and Bartkowski 2005; Wilcox 2004). It does so, as we have seen, by providing men with family-related norms to guide their behavior. It also provides them with status rewards for acting in accordance with those norms; for instance, men who are good husbands and fathers are given positions in churches as deacons, ushers, and the like. To date, there has been no research that specifically finds that religion is a more powerful predictor of relationship behavior for men than women. Nevertheless, recent work on religion and family suggests that men are more likely than women to connect their family roles with churchgoing (Edgell 2006). If men’s relationship behavior is affected by institutional contexts more than women’s behavior, we would expect them to benefit more from religion than women.

Varieties of Religious Influences

Much of the work on religion and marital quality has used cross-sectional data that do not allow insight about the causal direction of the association between religious belief and practice (Greeley 1991; Wilcox 2004; M. Wilson and Filsinger 1986; but see Booth *et al.* 1995). Any associations between religion and marital quality may be an artifact of the fact that happily married adults are especially likely to participate in religious organizations that lend social and moral support to marriage (Booth *et al.* 1995). Our study employs longitudinal data in an effort to specify with greater confidence the causal relationship between religion and relationship quality for both married and unmarried parents. (We nevertheless qualify our findings on the grounds that unmeasured variables may both cause higher religiosity and higher relationship quality among our respondents, thereby rendering the relationship between religion and relationship quality spurious.)

We focus on one measure of religiosity: religious attendance. Religious attendance is viewed primarily as a measure of a parent’s integration into a religious congregation and its attendant rituals, norms, and networks. We consider four varieties of religious attendance: consistently high and low levels of attendance from birth to one year after birth, transitions from infrequent attendance to weekly attendance over this same period, and transitions from weekly attendance to infrequent attendance over this period. We theorize that the habits (e.g., supportive behavior) and dispositions (e.g., relationship commitment) fostered by regular religious attendance, and associated with good relationships, take time to develop and must be encouraged on an ongoing basis (Wilcox 2004). Hence, we predict that parents who have consistently high levels of attendance will be more likely to invest themselves in their relationship, and to express happiness with their relationship, than parents who are not religious, who have just become religiously active, or who have recently ceased being religious.

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: Religiosity—as measured by religious attendance—is associated with more supportive behaviors, more positive assessments of intimate relationships, and better overall relationship quality among parents in urban America.

Hypothesis 1a: The effects of religiosity will be stronger for men than for women.

Hypothesis 1b: The effects of religiosity will be stronger for married couples than for unmarried couples.

Hypothesis 2: Compared to parents who have just started attending religious services on a regular basis, parents in urban America who have consistently participated in church services over time engage in more supportive relationship behavior and enjoy higher levels of relationship happiness.

METHODS

Data

We analyze data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW), a national survey designed to provide information on new unwed parents and their children in large U.S. cities (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001). The study includes a comparison sample of married parents. FFCW is the first longitudinal study to focus on unwed urban parents and the first to include data from non-cohabiting unwed fathers.

FFCW follows 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents in twenty cities with populations over 200,000. New mothers were interviewed in the hospital within 48 hours of giving birth, and new fathers were interviewed at the hospital or at another location shortly after birth (Wave 1). These baseline data were collected from February 1998 to September 2000. Follow-up data were collected from both mothers and fathers in two separate interviews approximately 12 months (Wave 2) and 30 (Wave 3) months after birth. The survey's initial response rates are high—85 percent of eligible mothers and 76 percent of eligible fathers responded to the first wave of the survey—especially given that the target population includes low-income parents who are often difficult to contact. We analyze respondents who participated in all three waves of data collection and remained romantically involved throughout. We exclude mothers who did not respond to Wave 3 (N = 669), fathers who did not respond to Wave 3 (N = 1,591), respondents no longer in a relationship by Wave 3 (N = 1,692), respondents missing data on our four dependent variables (N = 120), missing data on variables measuring religious participation (N = 22), and missing data on other independent variables (N = 53).

The sample size for all analyses is 3,372, comprising 1,670 married and unmarried male/female couples. All analyses are unweighted. The weights make just the interviews with partners unmarried at birth nationally representative, so they are problematic when studying both married and unmarried couples. They also discard more than one quarter of cases from analyses. Missing data, few in number, are deleted listwise except for the variable measuring maternal education.¹ For this item, a categorical variable, missing data are addressed with an additional dummy. More sophisticated means of handling missing data, such as multiple imputation, do not in general perform appreciably better (Paul *et al.* 2003). Also, we repeated our analysis after deleting listwise all cases missing data on maternal education and obtained similar results.

In supplemental analyses we explored the relationship between religious involvement and attrition, either by survey nonresponse or union dissolution. These analyses show no consistent effects related to consistently high religious involvement. Also, church attendance does not affect union dissolution for either married or unmarried Fragile Families couples. However, individuals with increasing church attendance over time have slightly lower rates of inclusion in our sample. This means that any observed effects of increasing attendance are biased downwards. Otherwise, sample selection based on religious involvement probably has no effect on our results. Our results are also unlikely to

reflect spurious relationships between religious participation and union quality. To explore this issue we examined the effects of union quality at Wave 1 on church attendance at Wave 3 and found results that differ from those of our primary analysis: perceived union satisfaction at Wave 1 is unrelated to partner's church attendance at Wave 3.

Variables

We analyze two dependent variables, both tapping union quality among urban mothers and fathers. Each is obtained at the 30-month follow-up and is measured separately for both mothers and fathers. *Overall relationship quality* is measured with a single item and varies from 5-“poor” to 1-“excellent.” We reversed the coding on this variable so that higher scores indicate positive outcomes. A second dependent variable ascertains whether each parent perceives his or her partner to be *supportive*. This is a scale composed of four separate items, measuring the extent to which each partner: expresses affection or love, encourages his/her partner to do the things important to him/her, listens to his/her partner when s/he needs someone to talk to, and really understands his/her partner's hurts and joys. The scale was reliable for both male ($\alpha = .74$) and female ($\alpha = .76$) respondents, with higher values reflecting more supportive partners.

The primary independent variables ascertain religious involvement. *Change in religious attendance* is measured at Waves 1 and 2 to increase the likelihood that its association with relationship quality, measured at Wave 3, is causal. It is coded as a four-category nominal variable: consistently high church attendance (at least once a week), consistently low attendance (less than once a week), increasing attendance (movement from low to high), and decreasing attendance (movement from high to low). In select models religious attendance is interacted with a dummy measuring *marital status* (married vs. unmarried) at Wave 3. We experimented with a variable measuring congruence among mothers' and fathers' religious participation, but it was nonsignificant and is therefore omitted from the results presented here.

We use various control variables in an attempt to reduce spuriousness in the association between religious involvement and relationship quality. Demographic controls include *mothers' age*, *fathers' age* (in years), and *race/ethnicity* (white, African-American, Latino, other; white is the reference category). Given the strength of racial/ethnic homogamy among couples we only use information from one partner. We control for socioeconomic status with measures of education and labor force participation. *Education* at Wave 2 is coded as less than high school, high school graduate, some college, or four year college degree; less than high school is the reference category. We use the education of only one partner per dyad because of high correlation within couples. This is not an issue with employment, so we measure labor force participation activity within the week before the Wave 2 survey for both mothers and fathers.

Certain religious denominations may foster higher rates of church attendance as well as different behavior in romantic relationships. We use race and denominational affiliation at Wave 1 to place respondents into five religious categories. We divide African-American respondents who report a Protestant affiliation into one of two categories (Steensland *et al.* 2000). Black respondents who report a Baptist, Methodist, or Pentecostal or other sectarian affiliation are coded as *Black Protestant*. A very small number of Black respondents who report an Episcopalian, Lutheran, Congregational, or Presbyterian affiliation are coded as *Other*, as are respondents from other ethnic backgrounds who report these Protestant affiliations or identify as Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, or any other non-Christian affiliation. Except for Muslims, these are uncommon religions among urban Americans. Although members of these faiths may behave in different ways with respect to intimate relationships, there are too few cases to test for specific denominational effects. White, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American respondents who indicate a Baptist, Pentecostal, or other sectarian denominational affiliation are coded as *conservative Protestant* (Steensland *et al.* 2000), while respondents who indicate a Catholic affiliation are coded as *Catholic*. Respondents who report no religious affiliation are coded as *None*; this is the reference category. An additional dummy variable ascertains whether partners share the same denomination. We experimented with interactions between denomination and religious participation

because previous work suggests that the effect of religious participation on relationships varies by religious tradition (Edgell 2006; Wilcox 2004). These interactions were not significant and accordingly are omitted from our final models.

An additional control variable measures whether the mother *was living in an intact family at age 15*; prior research suggests that family structure of origin can affect both marital quality (Amato and Booth 1997) and religious practices (Lawton and Bures 2001).

The direction of causality in the relationship between premarital cohabitation, religious involvement, and relationship quality is unclear. We experimented with a variable measuring whether unmarried respondents were cohabiting, but it had no appreciable effects on our results and is therefore omitted from our final analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides summary statistics for our sample. Of particular note is that the majority of our sample—more than 60 percent of both mothers and fathers—registered low levels of church attendance, about one in six respondents attended at high levels at both birth and one year after birth, and approximately one in six respondents saw increases or decreases in their church attendance. Both whites and Latinos each make up slightly less than one-third of our sample, whereas African Americans make up slightly more than one-third; others (e.g., Asian Americans) make up five percent or less. Black Protestants account for a quarter of the sample, Catholics one-third, conservative Protestants one-fifth, other denominations about 10 percent, and unaffiliated respondents about 10 percent. Almost two-thirds of the sample is married. Additional analysis, not shown, indicates that churchgoing is most common among African American and married parents in urban America.

Analysis

We explore the association of religious involvement and other factors with our two dependent variables, overall relationship happiness and the scale of relationship supportiveness. Hypothesis 1 predicts differences in the relationship between religion and union quality by both respondent gender and marital status, so we require an analytic framework that allows us to test variation across these dimensions. In addition, our data are clustered within mother-father dyads. Perceived relationship quality for each partner within a couple may be affected by the same unmeasured independent variables. A solution is seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) (e.g., Greene 2002). SUR provides more efficient estimates of parameters and standard errors because error terms are allowed to be correlated across equations for men and women.

We begin by analyzing respondents' perceptions of relationship quality as a product of both partner's religious participation, then add interactions between the variables measuring religious participation and marital status. Thus we estimate a total of four SUR models, two for each dependent variable; each model contains separate equations for male and female respondents.

RESULTS

According to Hypothesis 1, religiosity is positively associated with happy relationships. This hypothesis is supported by the results. Table 2 examines the effects of religious participation on reports of overall relationship quality. Both men and women report higher relationship quality when the men consistently attend church on a weekly basis, but regular attendance by women does not improve union quality (Model 1). Hypothesis 1a, which suggests that the benefits of religious involvement are stronger for men than for women, is therefore supported. For father's reported relationship quality, their consistently high church attendance has a significantly stronger effect than does mother's consistently high attendance. Father's attendance also has a stronger effect on mother's reports of relationship quality

than does mother's attendance. Hypothesis 2, which suggests that consistently high attendance should produce more benefits than recently increased attendance, is also supported (note that fathers who experience an increase in church attendance are also likely to report that they are happier in their relationships).

At about one-third to one-fourth of a standard deviation, the effects of fathers' attendance are neither large nor trivial. Nevertheless, religious participation has stronger effects than almost all sociodemographic factors in predicting relationship quality among urban parents. The primary exception is marital status, which has large and significant effects on women's and, especially, men's perceptions of relationship quality. Other factors affecting union satisfaction are religious denomination (men are less happy when their partners are conservative Protestants), shared religious affiliation (men are happier when they share their partner's denomination), race (men report lower satisfaction when in unions with African-American and Latino women), education, family structure at age fifteen, and age. Almost all of these variables have weaker effects on union quality than does men's religious participation.

Table 2 Here

Hypothesis 1b suggests that the benefits of religious participation should be stronger for married respondents. This hypothesis is not supported by the results. Model 2 adds interactions between marital status and all the religious involvement variables contained in Model 1 of Table 1. Marriage still benefits both male and female respondents, while men's church attendance continues to have a positive effect on men's perceptions of union quality (but not women's perceptions). However, there are no statistically significant interactions between these variables. Therefore religious participation offers the same benefits to married and unmarried parents.

Table 3 shows how various measures of religious participation are related to our scale of partner supportiveness. Most notably, these results indicate that fathers' consistently high church attendance continues to be associated with union quality. Men who attend regularly report that their partners are more supportive. Men's ongoing religious participation also increases their partners' reports of supportiveness, although the coefficient is marginally significant ($p = .06$). Hypothesis 2, which suggests that consistently high attendance should produce more benefits than recently increased attendance, continues to be supported. In contrast, regular church attendance on the part of female partners does not increase perceived supportiveness. Moreover, fathers in relationships with Catholic or conservative Protestant mothers are less likely to see their partners as supportive. These findings provide additional support for Hypothesis 1a, which states that religious participation affects men more than women. In addition, marriage has a positive and significant effect on the likelihood that men (but not women) perceive their partner as supportive.

Table 3 Here

The results for partner supportiveness do not vary by marital status. Model 2 of Table 3 adds interactions between marital status and religious participation to the analyses of partner supportiveness. None of these interactions are statistically significant. This provides further evidence against Hypothesis 1b, which suggests that religious participation should provide greater benefit for married couples.

The most consistent pattern across Tables 2 and 3 is the relationship between fathers' religious participation and union well-being. Men who report consistently high church attendance report better relationships and more supportive partners. Men's church attendance also increases their partners' appraisal of relationship quality. These results do not vary by respondent marital status. Furthermore, women's church attendance does not improve the relationships of either men or women.

Tables 2 and 3 also suggest that marriage is associated with relationship quality, especially for men, a result consistent with the general literature on union well-being (e.g., Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Indeed, marriage and church attendance stand out as the two strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction. Otherwise, there are only three consistent patterns. Respondents from intact families have better relationships; so too do younger respondents. Both results accord with prior studies (e.g. Glenn and Kramer 1985; Umberson *et al.* 2005), inspiring confidence that our data are valid. In addition, men whose partners are conservative Protestants or Catholics report worse relationships. This is a surprising finding; perhaps women from these traditions make more demands on

their partners, like asking them to refrain from drinking alcohol or engaging in substance abuse. Perhaps these are demands their partners do not appreciate (for a related argument regarding couples in Latin America, see Brusco [1995]).

CONCLUSION

Religion and family are institutions that typically lend normative and social support to one another (Edgell 2003; Pankhurst and Houseknecht 2000; Wilcox 2004). Indeed, much of the literature on religion and family suggests that religion has positive effects on family life in general and marriage in particular (Call and Heaton 1997; Christiano 2000; Pearce and Axinn 1998; Waite and Lehrer 2003; Wilcox 2004). But research to date has not considered whether the association between religion and relationship quality may vary by the degree of fit between religion and various family forms.

Thus, one of the central objectives of this study is to see if the positive effects of religion extend to families which do not fit the normative model held up by religious institutions: in particular, unmarried parents heading up fragile families in urban America. For both of this study's outcomes, fathers' religious attendance is associated with better relationships regardless of marital status. So, this study suggests that religion is positively associated with both marital quality *and* the quality of cohabiting and visiting romantic relationships among parents in urban America.

There are many reasons why unmarried parents may benefit from fathers' religious participation. Church attendance may have indirect positive effects if, perhaps in conjunction with religious beliefs, it fosters generic caring behaviors among fathers, provides men and women with access to social support, or buffers against the social and economic stresses that can harm relationships (Ammerman 1997; Edgell 2006; Ellison 1994). Urban churches also erect strong normative barriers against the street, and street behaviors like drug use, infidelity, and idleness; their commitment to decent living may foster higher-quality relationships among both married and unmarried couples by helping them to steer clear of behaviors that could undermine their relationship (McRoberts 2003). It is also possible that urban congregations are adjusting to the proliferation of fragile families by adapting pro-marriage norms and social support to unmarried couples. For instance, norms about sexual fidelity or informal guidance about relationships now may be extended by churches to unmarried couples. Alternatively, because many unmarried couples aspire to marriage (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Forste 2005), they may identify with marriage-related norms and receive social support from church members who hope they will eventually marry.

Future research should seek to determine if the generally positive effect of religion described here hold for other forms of relationships: gay and lesbian couples, married and cohabiting couples who do not have children, and single-parent families. Work by Edgell (2006) on innovative congregations that seek to provide normative and practical support to nontraditional families suggests that these families may also benefit from such religious participation. Future research should also seek to determine the precise mechanisms that explain why religion appears to be beneficial to couples heading up fragile families, and if these effects also apply to samples of predominantly middle-class, white couples who are cohabiting with children in suburban America (our sample was 70 percent non-white minorities).

The second objective of this study was to determine if the effect of religion on relationships varies by gender—another issue that has received little direct attention in the literature on religion and family. We offer strong evidence that gender matters. Our results indicate that fathers' regular religious attendance, but not mothers' attendance, is related to both fathers' and mothers' perceptions of relationship quality. Fathers' attendance is also related to reports of partner supportiveness for both fathers and mothers. These results support three conclusions. First, it appears that religious institutions are successful at fostering stronger investments in relationships by men, by turning their attention to the needs and concerns of their families (Wilcox 2004). Second, judging by the effect that fathers' attendance has on their assessments of relationship quality, religious attendance seems to make fathers more likely to take a favorable view of their relationship. Churchgoing fathers may have more realistic expectations of their partners, view their relationship in a spiritual light that makes them look more favorably on their

partners, or feel more secure in their relationships. Third, mothers also may look more favorably on a partner—above and beyond his actual behavior—who attends church, viewing such attendance as a mark of responsibility, maturity, or trustworthiness.

Our results suggest that men's approach to intimate partnerships, more so than women's, is shaped by the institutional contexts of those relationships (Nock 1998; Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004). For a range of reasons—from childhood socialization to the institutionalization of gender in work and leisure—men are less likely to focus on relationships (Maccoby 1998; Thompson and Walker 1989; Wilcox and Bartkowski 2005). Religion is one institution that encourages men to resist this tendency (Edgell 2006; Wilcox and Bartkowski 2005). Religious congregations do this by providing men with family-focused norms, values, and status rewards that foster investments—emotional, material, and otherwise—in family life. Previous research also shows that religious participation, especially men's, increases marriage rates in fragile families (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007).

In the future, research should consider whether other institutional contexts—aside from marriage and religion—foster men's participation in relationships. Studies should determine whether the link between religion and gender applies to other family roles. For instance, is religiosity more consequential for fathers than for mothers in shaping parent-child interactions? For grandfathers compared to grandmothers? Finally, given the importance of parents' relationship quality to child outcomes, future research should seek to determine if parental religiosity is associated with child well-being; for example, perhaps religious participation buffers against the negative effects of cohabitation on child well-being (Brown 2004).

Finally, we acknowledge the possibility that men's religiosity may not *cause* higher quality relationships among urban parents. On the one hand, we do not think we have misspecified the direction of causality in this paper, given that our ancillary analyses indicate that relationship quality at Wave 1 does not influence partners' religiosity at Wave 3 of the survey. But it is possible that the association between men's religiosity and relationship quality is a spurious consequence of an unmeasured variable or variables. It might be, for instance, that men who are seeking to live according to a “code of decency” in urban America seek out churches to legitimate their way of life and are also motivated by this code to treat their female partners with respect and affection. Future research will have to explore the possibility that other factors—for instance, personality type, a strong family orientation, or a commitment to a code of decency—account for some or all of the relationship between men's religiosity and high-quality relationships among urban parents.

In conclusion, this study suggests that the association between religion and the romantic relationships of urban parents varies by gender but not by marital status. Despite the longstanding normative and social ties between religion and marriage in the U.S., and traditional sanctions against premarital sex and nonmarital childbearing, we find that religious attendance is linked to better relationships among both married and unmarried couples. It may well be that urban churches are adjusting to the dramatic demographic changes that have taken place outside and inside their sanctuaries by extending normative and social support to fragile families, or it could be that the normative, social, and psychological support that they provide to all their members redounds to the benefit of both married and unmarried couples.

But we do find significant variations in religious associations by gender. Fathers' attendance, but not mothers' attendance, makes his and hers relationships happier. These gendered effects are probably a consequence of the fact that religion is one of the few institutions that actively encourages men to focus on their families, whereas women are encouraged to focus on their families from a panoply of institutions. Of course, the irony is that men in the United States tend to be less religious than women (Miller and Stark 2002), a pattern we also find among our sample of urban mothers and fathers—66 percent of urban fathers are consistently infrequent churchgoers, compared to 61 percent of urban mothers. Our study suggests that men's lack of interest in supernatural affairs can spell trouble for their temporal affairs.

Endnote

1. In preliminary analyses we experimented with dummy variables for the small number of cases missing data on religiosity, but they did not produce substantially different results.

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Table 1. Summary Statistics.

	Mother	Father
Overall relationship quality	1.97 (.94)	1.88 (.89)
Partner is supportive	0.02 (.74)	0.00 (.75)
Religious participation		
Consistent high attendance	18%	16%
Consistent low attendance	61	66
Increasing attendance	14	13
Decreasing attendance	6	5
Religious affiliation		
None	9%	10
Black Protestant	27	27
Catholic	34	33
Conservative Protestant	20	19
Other	10	11
Shared religious affiliation	.68	.68
Married	.61	.61
Intact family at 15	.52	.53
Education		
Not H.S. graduate	26%	27%
High school graduate	30	29
Some college	25	26
College graduate	18	18
Worked last year	.54	.85
Race		
White	31%	29%
Black	35	37
Latino	29	30
Other	5	4
Age	27 (6)	29 (7)

Note : Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding error. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

N = 1,670 couples

Table 2. The Effect of Religiosity and Other Factors on Overall Relationship Quality.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Father's Reported Union Quality	Mother's Reported Union Quality	Father's Reported Union Quality	Mother's Reported Union Quality
Father's religious participation				
Consistent high attendance	.28***	.24**	.30*	.12
Consistent low attendance	---	---	---	---
Increasing attendance	.13*	.07	.09	.14
Decreasing attendance	.18	.17	.35*	.00
Consistent high attendance*married	---	---	-.03	.14
Increasing attendance*married	---	---	-.05	-.10
Decreasing attendance*married	---	---	-.25	.26
Mother's religious participation				
Consistent high attendance	-.03	.06	.02	.02
Consistent low attendance	---	---	---	---
Increasing attendance	-.10	-.08	.18	.01
Decreasing attendance	.00	-.03	.05	.00
Consistent high attendance*married	---	---	-.05	.03
Increasing attendance*married	---	---	.13	-.14
Decreasing attendance*married	---	---	-.11	-.04
Partners' religious affiliation				
None	---	---	---	---
Black Protestant	-.02	-.14	-.02	.14
Catholic	-.10	-.04	-.10	.04
Conservative Protestant	-.18*	-.04	-.19*	-.03
Other	-.08	-.01	-.08	.01
Shared religious affiliation	.11*	-.03	.11*	.03
Married	.29***	.14*	.29***	.15*
Controls				
Mother intact family at 15	.05	.11*	.05	.11*
Father intact family at 15	.02	.08	.02	.08
Father not H.S. grad	---	---	---	---
Father high school	-.05	.14	-.04	.14
Father some college	-.14	.16	-.14	.17
Father college graduate	.13	.40**	.14	.39**
Mother not H.S. grad	---	---	---	---
Mother high school	.00	-.01	.01	-.02
Mother some college	.00	.02	.01	.01
Mother college graduate	-.08	-.09	-.08	-.09
Dad worked last year	-.06	.05	-.06	.04
Mom worked last year	.07	.00	.07	.00
Partner white	---	---	---	---
Partner Black	-.27**	-.14	-.27**	-.13
Partner Latino	-.21**	-.15*	-.20**	-.15*
Partner other	.00	-.05	.01	-.04
Partner age	-.01*	-.01*	-.01*	-.01*
Constant	-1.65***	-1.94***	-1.66***	-1.94***
Rho		.30***		.31***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (2 tail tests)

Note: Missing data dummies are not shown. N = 1,670 couples.

Table 3. The Effect of Religiosity and Other Factors on Perceived Supportiveness.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Father's Reported Union Quality	Mother's Reported Union Quality	Father's Reported Union Quality	Mother's Reported Union Quality
Father's religious participation				
Consistent high attendance	.20**	.12	.37**	.12
Consistent low attendance	---	---	---	---
Increasing attendance	.09	.02	.11	.08
Decreasing attendance	.09	.00	.10	-.16
Consistent high attendance*married	---	---	-.21	.00
Increasing attendance*married	---	---	-.03	-.09
Decreasing attendance*married	---	---	-.01	.24
Mother's religious participation				
Consistent high attendance	.03	.09	-.01	.08
Consistent low attendance	---	---	---	---
Increasing attendance	.03	.01	.11	.01
Decreasing attendance	.08	-.10	-.08	-.01
Consistent high attendance*married	---	---	-.03	.01
Increasing attendance*married	---	---	-.12	.00
Decreasing attendance*married	---	---	.30	-.17
Partners' religious affiliation				
None	---	---	---	---
Black Protestant	.09	.03	-.09	.03
Catholic	-.19*	.03	-.20**	.10
Conservative Protestant	-.22**	.09	-.22**	.10
Other	.16	.11	-.17*	.11
Shared religious affiliation	.02	.02	.02	.02
Married	.09*	.04	.11*	.05
Controls				
Mother intact family at 15	.06	.01	.06	-.01
Father intact family at 15	.10*	.03	.10*	.02
Father not H.S. grad	---	---	---	---
Father high school	.02	.07	.02	.07
Father some college	-.03	.05	-.03	.05
Father college graduate	.07	.12	.07	.13
Mother not H.S. grad	---	---	---	---
Mother high school	.01	.09	.01	-.10
Mother some college	-.06	.01	-.07	.00
Mother college graduate	-.13	.01	-.13	.01
Dad worked last year	-.01	.03	.00	.03
Mom worked last year	.05	.05	.06	.04
Partner white	---	---	---	---
Partner Black	-.13	-.03	-.12	-.03
Partner Latino	-.06	.01	.06	.01
Partner other	-.16	-.03	-.16	.03
Partner age	-.01*	-.01**	.01	-.01**
Constant	.22	.09	.20	.08
Rho		.21***		.21***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (2 tail tests)

Note: Missing data dummies are not shown. N = 1,670 couples.