

If I [Take] Leave, Will You Stay? Paternity Leave and Marital Stability

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ABSTRACT

Paternity leave may provide a number of benefits to families, but research has yet to consider whether paternity leave may contribute to parental relationship stability. Paternity leave-taking may signal a commitment by fathers toward an egalitarian division of labor, which may reduce the burden on mothers and strengthen marriages. This study uses longitudinal data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) to analyze the association between paternity leave-taking and marital stability in the United States. Results indicate that paternity leave-taking is associated with greater marital stability. In regard to length of paternity leave, results suggest that either short (one week or less) or moderately long (a month) leaves are associated with a lower risk of marital dissolution relative to couples in which fathers do not take leave. These findings increase our understanding of the potential benefits of paternity leave, and can inform policy decisions that aim to increase family stability.

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Most couples today desire to share paid and unpaid labor, but many have difficulty achieving egalitarian relationships (Gerson, 2010). In addition to being viewed as more just and fair to both partners, egalitarian arrangements for paid work, housework, and childcare are associated with greater sexual intimacy, relationship quality, and relationship stability than conventional (e.g., male breadwinner – female homemaker) or counter-conventional (e.g., female breadwinner – male homemaker) arrangements (Carlson, Miller, Sassler, & Hanson, 2016; Carlson, Hanson, & Fitzroy, 2016; Carlson, Miller, & Sassler, 2018; Frisco & Williams, 2003; Schwartz & Gonalons-Pons, 2016).

When couples cannot achieve egalitarian relationships, the fallback is often conventional gender roles, especially for domestic work (Pedulla & Thebáud, 2015). This is particularly likely after having a child. Motherhood is associated not only with a reduction in women's labor force participation but also an increase in domestic labor that coincides with shouldering the majority of childcare duties (Cohany & Sok, 2007; Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Fatherhood, on the other hand, has been shown to increase men's labor force participation (Kaufmann & Uhlenberg, 2000). Although egalitarian attitudes moderate the movement toward conventional roles following childbirth (Kaufmann & Uhlenberg, 2000; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997), attitudes themselves are shaped by structural constraints that limit couples' agency in shaping their division of labor (Carlson & Lynch, 2013; Pedulla & Thebáud, 2015).

Because conventional divisions of labor may threaten relationship stability and are strongly linked to parenting, practices and policies that can lead to more egalitarian parenting

may be especially important for maintaining relationship quality and reducing the risk of relationship dissolution. One such policy and practice is paternity leave. Paternity leave-taking may help to reduce the likelihood of relationship dissolution by alleviating family-work conflict and increasing relationship satisfaction, especially for mothers (Newkirk, Perry-Jenkins, & Sayer, 2017; Schober, 2012).

Emerging research suggests that paternity leave is associated with increases in father involvement and relationship quality among European as well as U.S. couples (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Bünning, 2015; Kotsadam & Finseraas, 2011; Petts & Knoester, 2018; Pragg & Knoester, 2017). Furthermore, because more egalitarian divisions of labor are increasingly associated with higher quality, stable relationships (Carlson et al., 2016; Carlson et al., 2018; Schwartz & Gonalons-Pons, 2016), it may be that paternity leave-taking is positively associated with relationship stability. However, research has yet to examine whether leave-taking by U.S. fathers is associated with relationship stability.

In this study, we estimate associations between paternity leave-taking and marital stability using data from a U.S. sample of parents. In doing so, this study contributes to a growing literature on the consequences of paternity leave-taking. Understanding the potential benefits of paternity leave for families is particularly important within the United States, as the U.S. does not have a statutory paid parental leave policy and most Americans lack access to paid leave (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017; World Bank Group, 2018). Such knowledge may help policymakers to develop family policies that may benefit U.S. society.

BACKGROUND

The United States is an outlier when it comes to parental leave policy. Specifically, the vast majority of countries throughout the world, and all OECD countries, provide paid parental

leave to mothers (either as a parental or maternity leave policy) (World Bank Group, 2018). A sizeable percentage of countries (and 94% of OECD countries) also have national policies that allow fathers to take paid leave either through a paternity leave policy or a shared parental leave policy (Blum et al., 2018; International Labour Organization, 2014; World Bank Group, 2018). In contrast, the only national leave policy in the U.S. is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). FMLA provides up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to parents after childbirth for U.S. employees who meet eligibility requirements, which excludes approximately 40% of the workforce (Blum et al., 2018). Furthermore, many eligible workers do not take parental leave under FMLA (or use the full period of leave) because it is unpaid (Klerman, Daley, & Pozniak, 2012). In addition, estimates suggest that approximately 33% to 50% of companies offer at least partially-paid maternity leave whereas only 15-17% of employers offer paid paternity leave (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017; Matos, Galinsky, & Bond, 2017).

Paid family leave policies do exist at the state level, however, as four states have implemented paid family leave policies (California, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and New York), with additional policies planned in other states (Washington in 2020, Washington, D.C. in 2020, and Massachusetts in 2021). These policies vary in their level of wage replacement, length of leave offered, and whether jobs are protected (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2018). Although progress is being made, most American fathers currently lack access to paid paternity leave.

Despite a lack of access to paid leave in the U.S., fathers are expected to be present for their child's birth and most fathers take some time off when their child is born (Petts & Knoester, 2018; Pragg & Knoester, 2017). Periods of leave are relatively short, with fathers taking one week of leave or less, on average (Petts, Knoester, & Li, 2018; Pragg & Knoester, 2017). Given

the uneven access to paternity leave in the U.S. context, there are disparities in leave-taking patterns, as fathers who are more socioeconomically advantaged are more likely to have access to leave, and take longer leaves, on average, than fathers who are less socioeconomically disadvantaged (Klerman et al., 2012; Petts et al., 2018; Winston, 2014). However, similar disparities exist in countries with national paid parental leave policies due to variations in eligibility requirements (McKay, Mathieu, & Doucet 2016; O'Brien, 2009; Twamley & Schober, 2018).

Overall, given that most American workers lack access to paid parental leave, it is important to understand the consequences of paternity leave-taking within this context because evidence of benefits associated with leave-taking may help to support future U.S. policies on paid parental leave. The current study focuses on the potential implications of paternity leave for marital stability, which has not yet been examined in the U.S. or internationally.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our conceptual framework utilizes role theory to focus on the challenges of fulfilling domestic and breadwinning roles after the arrival of a child, and the implications of paternity leave-taking for relationship stability. It is important to emphasize that childbearing places great stress on relationships, especially in the era of the dual-earner couple, as infants primarily rely on their parents for emotional, social, and physical care (Cowan et al., 1985; Waldfogel, 2006). Not only must couples find time and energy for the carework and housework that accompanies parenting responsibilities, but they must also make decisions about paid work and domestic divisions of labor. Consequently, parenting responsibilities may conflict with parents' other responsibilities as workers and partners.

From a role theory perspective (Goode, 1960; Hecht, 2001), the family and work strains that accompany the arrival of a new child may result in role conflict (i.e., stress from competing roles), role overload (i.e., stress from inability to complete role responsibilities), and role spillover (i.e., stress when one role transfers to another). These strains may lead to decreases in relationship and co-parenting quality (Hecht 2001; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003), which may threaten relationship stability (Gager & Sanchez, 2003). Indeed, relationship quality declines after having a child, especially among mothers (Cowan et al., 1985; Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Keizer & Schenk, 2012; Twenge et al., 2003). This is because role strain is felt most acutely by women, who face work-family conflict given the expectation that they act as primary caretakers of children (Hays, 1996).

Difficulties balancing work and family responsibilities, gendered dynamics of childcare, and high daycare costs often result in conventional divisions of labor among both breadwinner-homemaker and dual-earner couples in the U.S. (Kimmel, 1998; Yavorsky et al., 2015). In particular, intensive mothering expectations encourage women to reduce their time in paid employment following a birth (Cohany & Sok, 2007; Hays, 1996; Stone, 2008). Wage discrimination and penalties may also pressure women to reduce work hours due to diminishing returns on their employment (England et al., 2016). Even when women remain employed through pregnancy and after a birth, they still experience an increase in unpaid labor at home that is not matched by men, increasing the gender gap in domestic responsibilities (Yavorsky et al., 2015).

Consistent with the benefits of specialization (Becker, 1981), conventional arrangements were associated with higher levels of relationship quality and stability prior to the 1990s. However, this no longer appears to be the case. Recent research on contemporary couples

demonstrates that more egalitarian contributions to breadwinning, housework, and childcare are associated with greater sexual intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and relationship stability (Carlson, Hanson, & Fitzroy, 2016; Carlson et al., 2016; Schwartz & Gonalons-Pons, 2016).

Although couples may engage in conventional divisions of labor to offset parenting strains, such arrangements may undermine, instead of improve, relationship quality and stability. Conversely, sharing labor may help partners balance competing responsibilities.

Egalitarianism seems to be associated with greater relationship quality and stability because both men and women view such arrangements as more equitable than conventional or counter-conventional arrangements. In fact, conventional arrangements are thought of as increasingly less fair, and the association between perceived fairness and egalitarian arrangements has increased over time (Carlson et al., 2016). This trend may have consequences for relationship stability; couples who view their division of labor as equitable are less likely to dissolve their relationships than those in which one or both partners find their division of labor to be unfair (Frisco & Williams, 2003).

Although the vast majority of Americans desire egalitarian relationships and view them as the fairest way to divide labor, most struggle to achieve them (Gerson, 2010; Shu & Meagher, 2017). This is due to cultural frames, public policies, and institutional arrangements that reinforce conventionally gendered behaviors (Risman, 1999; Ridgeway, 2009). Parenting, domestic labor that involves childcare and housework, and breadwinning are central to the gender structure (Risman, 2004). Therefore, policies and practices that can encourage egalitarianism in the midst of domestic labor and breadwinning responsibilities, and reduce the strains associated with these roles, may have significant ramifications for relationship stability among couples, as well as gender equality more generally.

PATERNITY LEAVE AND RELATIONSHIP STABILITY

Paternity leave is a policy that has the potential to aid couples in achieving an egalitarian balance and stabilize marriages. Although cultural conceptions of intensive mothering continue to emphasize mothers' essential role in child development, emerging fatherhood ideals encourage men to be more actively involved in children lives (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). American fathers desire to spend more time at home and are more likely to place importance on emotional availability, family time, and father-child bonding, and have also tripled the amount of time spent in daily instrumental childcare compared to fathers in previous generations (Bianchi et al., 2012; McGill, 2014). Yet, fathers are often judged primarily on their capacity to provide financially for their families (Albiston & O'Connor, 2016). By providing time away from work to focus on family life after the birth of a child, paternity leave (and longer periods of leave) may help fathers to manage this role conflict and focus on meeting family needs. As such, taking paternity leave may help to promote marital stability.

Specifically, paternity leave-taking may encourage and represent commitments to egalitarianism by allowing men to be engaged fathers and allowing women to stay in careers. Leave, especially extended periods of leave, provides men with time to participate in childcare and housework tasks that are traditionally performed by mothers, helps partners learn how to share tasks, and establishes expectations for a more equitable division of labor (Johansson, 2010; Nomaguchi, Brown, & Leyman, 2017; Rehel, 2014). Taking leave also enhances the probability that fathers will continue to participate more fully in childcare and housework after leave ends (Cabrera, Fagan, & Farrie, 2008; Petts & Knoester, 2018). Yet, paternity leave also allows men to maintain their paid careers (Rehel 2014; Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007). Indeed, paternity leave-taking and length of paternity leave are positively associated with father involvement in both

developmental and caretaking tasks (Hosking, Whitehouse, & Baxter, 2010; Huerta et al., 2014; Petts & Knoester, 2018; Pragg & Knoester, 2017; Schober, 2014; Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007). Although research in the U.S. is scant on other consequences of paternity leave, paternity leaves and “daddy quotas” in Europe have led to significant increases in the sharing of housework (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Bünning, 2015; Kotsadam & Finseraas, 2011). Overall, evidence suggests that paternity leave-taking (and longer periods of leave) may both signal a commitment to egalitarianism and promote more egalitarian divisions of labor.

More equitable sharing of childcare and other domestic work is likely to increase (especially mother’s) satisfaction with the division of labor and decrease (especially mother’s) parenting role stress (Knoester & Petts, 2017; Nomaguchi et al., 2017). Indeed, couples that share childcare and housework report greater satisfaction with the division of labor, greater feelings of equity, and greater relationship satisfaction than couples in less egalitarian relationships (Carlson et al., 2016). Father involvement in childcare is also positively associated with mothers’ reports of relationship quality, suggesting that increased involvement following leave may have positive consequences for parental relationships (Hohmann-Marriott, 2009; Kalmijn, 1999; Keizer & Shenk, 2012; McClain & Brown, 2017). There is some limited evidence suggesting that paternity leave-taking may lead to improvements in couple’s relationship satisfaction (Author Citation; Kotsadam & Finseraas, 2011). If paternity leave-taking (and taking longer periods of leave) is associated with positive relationship outcomes, then it is also possible that paternity leave contributes to marital stability given the close association between marital quality and marital stability (Gottman, 1994). Therefore, we expect that paternity leave-taking and length of paternity leave will be positively associated with marital stability.

DATA AND METHODS

DATA

Data is taken from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). The ECLS-B contains a nationally representative sample of approximately 14,000 children born in the U.S. in 2001. For this study, data is taken from all available waves: information was collected from parents when children were approximately 9 months old (W1), two years old (W2), four years old (W3), and five or six years old (W4 and W5).¹

The sample is restricted to families in which parents were married because norms regarding marriage, parenthood, and employment for men are intertwined in the U.S. (Townsend, 2002). Additionally, non-marital cohabiting unions in the U.S. remain distinct from marriage, and legally unrecognized (Kiernan, 2004). Cohabitation, therefore, is highly selective and less stable than marriage (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006; Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004). The sample is also limited to fathers who were employed at the time of their child's birth and were employed following the child's birth to accurately assess information about paternity leave. The sample was further restricted so that there was only one valid case for each family (one randomly chosen focal child from the subsample of twins was used as the focal child). These restrictions result in a sample size of 5,100 married couples (17,800 couple-years).

PATERNITY LEAVE

For this study, paternity leave is defined as taking time off work for the birth of a child. In W1, mothers were asked whether fathers took any time off for the birth of the focal child, and if so, how many weeks of leave (either paid or unpaid) fathers took. Unfortunately, there is no information in the data indicating whether fathers utilized a paternity leave policy (either FMLA or a company policy) or some other means (such as sick or vacation time) to take leave.

Regardless, these questions do focus on taking time off specifically for the birth of a child which is how paternity leave is generally defined in the U.S. context.

We focus on two indicators of paternity leave. *Paternity leave-taking* indicates whether fathers took leave (1 = *yes*). *Length of paternity leave* is a categorical variable indicating whether fathers took no leave (used as reference category), one week or less, 2 weeks, 3 weeks, 4 weeks, or 5 or more weeks of leave.

MARITAL DISSOLUTION

The primary dependent variable in this study is relationship dissolution. Relationships are considered dissolved if mothers report no longer being married to fathers. Couples are at risk for dissolution starting at W1 until either the relationship ended or the couple was censored. Marital dissolution is treated as a discrete event (marriages are treated as dissolved in the wave that the mother reports no longer being married to the father), and couples are right-censored if they dropped out of the survey or mothers were still married to fathers at W4.

CONTROL VARIABLES

Numerous variables are included as controls. Mothers' and fathers' income are measured in logged dollars and included as time-varying indicators. Race/ethnicity is coded as (a) both parents are white (used as reference category), (b) both parents are black, (c) both parents are Latino, (d) both parents report other race/ethnicity, and (e) each parent reports a different race/ethnicity. Time-varying indicators of parents' work hours are categorized as (a) does not work (this is included for fathers to allow this possibility in later waves), (b) part-time (less than 35 hours a week), (c) full-time (35-44 hours a week, used as reference category), and (d) more than full-time (45 hours a week or more).² Time-varying indicators of fathers' occupation type are categorized as (a) professional (used as reference category), (b) labor, (c) service, (d) sales,

or (e) other occupational type. We also include time-varying indicators of each parent's age, number of other children, and each parent's religious participation (0 = *never* to 4 = *once a week or more*). Controls for each parent's educational attainment (1 = *did not complete high school* to 4 = *college degree*), whether either parent was previously married, how long the couple had been together prior to W1 (in years), and length of maternity leave (in months) are also included. Finally, to account for initial variations in marital quality, we include a baseline measure of *relationship conflict* taken from W1, which is taken from mothers' responses on how often (1 = *never* to 4 = *often*) they argue with their spouse about ten items such as chores, children, money, and leisure time ($\alpha = .79$). The mean response is used as the indicator.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Life-table estimates and discrete-time event history models are used in this study. Life tables indicate the cumulative proportion of couples who dissolved their marriage by the fifth year after their child's birth. Chi-square tests are used to assess whether overall rates of marital dissolution significantly differ by paternity leave-taking and length of paternity leave.

Discrete-time logistic event history models are then used to assess whether paternity leave-taking and length of paternity leave are associated with union dissolution, accounting for potential confounders. Relationships are treated as dissolved if the couple ends their marriage between survey waves. Discrete-time models are appropriate for these analyses because mothers in the ECLS-B only reported dates of relationship dissolution in W1 and W2. Dissolution dates were utilized in supplementary Cox proportional hazards models (January of the interview year was used when a dissolution date was not provided), and results were consistent with those presented here. Indicators of each survey wave were included to estimate the baseline hazard (with the last wave used as the reference category). All continuous control variables are mean

centered to allow for easier interpretation. To account for missing data, multiple imputation from ten imputed models is used.

SELECTION

Given the unequal access to paternity leave in the U.S., selection is an important concern. Particularly, there may be factors that influence the likelihood that fathers take paternity leave (or various lengths of leave) and marital stability. Although we are unable to fully account for selection effects that may be due to unobservable factors (such as motivation to be a good father and/or husband), we attempt to minimize selection problems through the use of inverse probability of treatment weighting (IPTW). IPTW is a method that utilizes weights based on propensity scores to deal with selection by accounting for variations between the treatment (i.e., took paternity leave) and control (i.e., did not take leave) groups such that these groups differ in whether they received the treatment but are similar on all other baseline characteristics (Austin, 2016). To calculate these weights, we first estimated propensity scores using logistic regression to predict ever experiencing dissolution based on the W1 control variables, generating propensity scores, and matching respondents in the treatment and control groups with the closest propensity scores. We then ran diagnostic analyses to assess the propensity score model, including omitting cases in which the assumption for common support (i.e., propensity scores overlap between the treatment and control groups) was met and insuring balance was achieved. The calculated weights are included in the event history models to assess the likelihood of marital dissolution accounting for time-varying and time-invariant control variables as well as the propensity to take leave. These weights are equal to the inverse of the probability of receiving the treatment (Austin, 2016).

RESULTS

Mean values for all variables are presented separately for families in which fathers did and did not take paternity leave in Table 1. Overall, 89% of married fathers took time off after the birth of a child in these data. Consistent with other research, of the fathers who took leave, most took less than a week (64%) and only 16% of fathers who took leave took more than two weeks. Results in Table 1 also suggest that fathers who took leave are more socioeconomically advantaged (e.g., higher income, higher education, more likely to have a professional occupation) than fathers who did not take leave.

----- Insert Table 1 About Here -----

LIFE-TABLE ESTIMATES

As shown in Figure 1, life-table results provide support for our hypothesis in showing that unions in which fathers took paternity leave are less likely to dissolve than unions in which fathers did not take paternity leave. Specifically, 19% of marriages dissolved after fathers took leave compared to 32% of marriages when fathers did not take leave ($p < .001$). There is also evidence of variations in marital stability by length of paternity leave. As shown in Figure 2, marriages in which fathers do not take leave have the highest risk of dissolution. In contrast, marriages in which fathers took four weeks of leave had the lowest risk of dissolution (12% dissolved). Somewhat surprisingly, marriages in which fathers took 5 or more weeks of leave had the second highest likelihood of dissolution (29% dissolved), and these marriages were more likely to dissolve than marriages where fathers took one or four weeks of leave. It may be that especially long leaves (within the context of the U.S.) violate expectations for fathers to continue to fulfill their breadwinning commitments. Overall, results from life-table estimates largely provide support for our hypothesis.

----- Insert Figure 1 About Here -----

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DISCRETE-TIME EVENT HISTORY RESULTS

Results from discrete-time logistic event history models are presented in Table 2. First, zero-order effects are presented in Models 1 and 2. Results in Model 1 suggest that married couples in which fathers take leave have 32% lower odds of dissolving their relationship compared to couples in which fathers do not take leave. Moreover, results in Model 2 suggest that marital dissolution is less likely to occur when fathers take one week or less, two weeks, or four weeks of leave compared to when fathers do not take leave. Supplementary analyses suggest that the associations between paternity leave and marital stability do not vary over time (i.e., interactions between paternity leave and survey wave were not statistically significant). Thus, there is additional evidence supporting our hypothesis that paternity leave is positively associated with marital stability.

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Results from full models that include all control variables are presented in Models 3 and 4. Results in these models are largely consistent with the zero-order models; paternity leave-taking is associated with a lower risk of marital dissolution and taking one week or less of leave or four weeks of leave is associated with a lower risk of dissolution compared to married couples in which fathers do not take leave. Overall then, results provide fairly consistent support that taking paternity leave is associated with greater marital stability. Furthermore, taking a short leave (one week or less) or a month of leave seems to be most beneficial for promoting marital stability.

SENSITIVITY ANALYSES

Given that selection is a major concern, we conducted additional analyses to assess the robustness of our findings. Although research suggests that IPTW results in unbiased estimates in survival models (Austin, 2016), some studies find that IPTW produces biased estimates in other types of regression models (Freedman & Berk, 2008). Thus, we compared our results to discrete-time event history models in which IPTW is not used. We also compare estimates from our models to those obtained using propensity score matching (to assess selection on paternity leave-taking) and augmented inverse propensity weighted estimators, which is a variation of propensity score matching in which multiple treatments can be used (to assess selection on length of paternity leave). Although the selection model coefficients are different from the discrete-time logistic event history coefficients (as the selection model estimates come from models using a dummy variable indicating ever experiencing dissolution), the trends in the estimates are fairly consistent across each model, increasing confidence in our results (estimates are presented in the appendix, Table A1).

We also examined additional measures in supplementary analyses in an attempt to identify the pathways through which paternity leave may lead to relationship stability. These included baseline indicators of fathering attitudes and fathers' gender ideology (mothers' gender ideology is not included in W1 of the ECLS-B) and time-varying indicators of father involvement. Although a number of these factors were associated with dissolution in the expected direction, their inclusion did not change the results presented here and are not presented to maintain larger sample sizes (these items are asked in the resident father self-administered questionnaire, which only a subset of respondents completed; results available upon request). Overall, these analyses suggest that the available measures in these data are not sufficient in explaining the associations between paternity leave and marital stability. It may be that the

measures are not fine-tuned enough to capture important variance that occurs. In addition, it may be that the theorized mechanisms for which we do not have corresponding measures may be driving the associations between paternity leave and marital stability (e.g., satisfaction with the division of labor; reduction in role strain). Nevertheless, the reported findings on the relationship between paternity leave and marital stability are robust to the inclusion of the measures available.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to build on knowledge about parental leave to assess whether paternity leave-taking and length of paternity leave are associated with relationship stability within the United States. Although some studies have begun to look at the association between paternity leave and parental relationship outcomes (Author Citation; Kotsadam & Finseraas, 2011), research has yet to examine the association between paternity leave and relationship stability. Moreover, this relationship is particularly important in the context of the U.S., which is unique given a high divorce rate and no national paid parental leave policy (Amato & James, 2010; World Bank Group, 2018). Overall, the findings largely suggest that paternity leave is associated with greater marital stability among American parents.

First, we found evidence that paternity leave-taking is positively associated with marital stability. Life-table estimates indicated that married couples were more likely to stay together if fathers took paternity leave. In addition, paternity leave-taking was negatively associated with marital dissolution after accounting for potential confounders and selection factors in the event history models. Caring for infants is a time-intensive activity that can leave parents, especially mothers, sleep-deprived, fatigued, and distressed (Dennis & Ross, 2005; Martin et al., 2007; Waldfogel, 2006). Add to this the demands of employers, and parents may become overwhelmed, suffering from role strain, role overload, and role spillover (Goode, 1960). These

stressors may wear on parents' health, and undermine their marriages. Paternity leave can help alleviate role stress in both family and work domains for both fathers and mothers. It not only provides men the opportunity to be engaged fathers, but also help mothers maintain careers (Albiston & O'Connor, 2016; Johansson, 2010; Pragg & Knoester, 2017; Rehel, 2014). Helping mothers achieve work-family balance is especially important since women are most likely to initiate divorce (Birditt, Wan, Orbuch, & Antonucci, 2017), especially when they feel their relationships are unfair (Frisco & Williams, 2003). Taking leave may be particularly important within the U.S. given the stigma surrounding paternity leave (Albiston & O'Connor, 2016; Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Demonstrating a commitment to be involved may increase feelings of equity and consequently reduce the risk of marital dissolution (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Milkie et al., 2002; Rehel, 2014).

Second, we also found evidence suggesting that length of paternity leave was associated with marital stability. However, this does not appear to be a linear relationship in that longer periods of leave were not always associated with lower risks of marital dissolution. Instead, taking a short period of leave (i.e., one week or less) or a relatively long period of leave (i.e., four weeks) appeared to be most beneficial in promoting marital stability. The benefits of taking a short period of leave are likely similar to what was found for paternity leave-taking; taking only a few days off likely provides only limited time for fathers to learn how to become engaged parents and partners, to shoulder childcare responsibilities, and support their partners, but it might demonstrate a commitment by fathers to work towards these goals and distribute tasks more equally with mothers while still remaining fully entrenched in breadwinning roles (Albiston & O'Connor, 2016; Pragg & Knoester, 2017; Rehel, 2014). Yet, fathers likely have much more time to learn to be an engaged parent by taking four weeks of leave. Having this

period of time at home may enable parents to transition into life with a new child together, increasing the likelihood that both parents balance work and family demands, contribute to parenting and household tasks, and are satisfied with the division of labor (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Bünning, 2015; Rehel, 2014). Four weeks of leave may also enable fathers to effectively bond with their child, increasing the likelihood that they remain engaged parents as the child ages (Cabrera et al., 2008; Petts & Knoester, 2018), which may also contribute to more stable marriages (Carlson et al., 2016; Frisco & Williams, 2003).

There is also some evidence that the risk of marital dissolution is lower for couples where fathers took one week or four weeks of leave compared to couples where fathers took five weeks of leave. Although five or more weeks of leave may provide additional time for fathers to help out at home, these extended leaves may carry economic consequences. The ideal worker norm suggests that good workers are always available to work and should prioritize work (Williams, 2010), and taking more than one month off may lead employers to question whether these fathers are committed to their jobs. Indeed, there is a bias against workers who take leave in the U.S., and this bias can result in fathers receiving lower performance ratings, being viewed as less masculine, and earning less income due to taking leave (Coltrane et al., 2013; Rege & Solli, 2013; Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Fears about fathers' careers due to leave-taking exist outside of the U.S. as well, and this is a key barrier to increasing fathers' take-up rates of parental leave (Twamley & Schober, 2018). Experiencing economic penalties from taking leave may create additional strains during a stage in the life course already filled with stress, increasing the risk of marital dissolution.

Overall, results from this study suggest that paternity leave is associated with more stable parental relationships. Paternity leave may help parents to better balance work and family life by

providing time for parents to be home working together to effectively transition into their new roles and responsibilities after the birth of a child. As such, increasing access to paternity leave in the U.S. may provide families with structural supports that foster family stability. Such supports may be particularly important in the U.S. given high divorce rates (Amato & James, 2010). In addition to benefiting parental relationships, there is also evidence that policies that increase family stability may also benefit children (Craigie, Brooks-Gunn, & Waldfogel, 2012).

Nonetheless, this study has limitations. First, there is a lack of information about whether fathers are using family leave, paternity leave, or other leave programs (e.g., Family and Medical Leave Act, vacation or sick days, etc.). More precise information about length of leave (e.g., number of days) would also be helpful, given the relatively short leaves that U.S. fathers take. This information would allow for better assessments of whether particular types of leave are more or less effective in fostering relationship stability.

Second, the first wave of data was collected approximately nine months after the birth of a child and we are not able to assess the risk of dissolution starting at the time of marriage or birth of the child (couples were married for approximately 5 years at the start of the observation period). Thus, we are limited to focusing on the risk of dissolution starting shortly after the birth of a child. As such, we are not fully able to account for potential selection factors. Although we attempted to address selection effects to the extent we were able, future studies should continue to examine the associations between paternity leave and marital outcomes utilizing data collected both before and after a child's birth whenever possible.

Third, although results from this study provide some evidence that parents may be more likely to stay married if fathers take paternity leave (and longer periods of leave), we were unable to isolate the specific mechanisms that explain this association. Future research should

incorporate additional mechanisms (e.g., how childcare is divided within families, whether the division of labor is seen as equitable, how committed one's partner is to family relationships) that may help to explain the relationship between paternity leave and marital stability. Future research should also expand beyond the focus on marital stability to assess the association between paternity leave and stability for other types of parental relationships.

In conclusion, this study informs our understanding of parental leave within the U.S. context by focusing on whether leave-taking is associated with marital stability. Results provide some evidence that paternity leave-taking, and either short (week or less) or moderately long (a month) leaves in particular, are associated with a lower risk of marital dissolution. Within a society contextualized by high divorce rates and a lack of access to paid parental leave, these results provide some evidence of a potential benefit of paternity leave not yet previously considered by scholars. These findings may be especially useful to policymakers who aim to strengthen and stabilize parental relationships.

NOTES

¹ W4 was collected when children were in kindergarten or higher. Data was collected in 2006 for approximately 75% of the sample, and in 2007 for the remaining 25% of the sample.

² The categories of works full-time and more than full-time are combined for mothers.

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Table 1. Summary Statistics (W1)

| Variable | Did not take leave | | Took leave | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| Paternity Leave-Taking | 0.00 | - | 1.00*** | - |
| Length of Paternity Leave | | | | |
| No Leave ^a | 1.00 | - | 0.00*** | - |
| One Week or Less | 0.00 | - | 0.64*** | - |
| Two Weeks | 0.00 | - | 0.22*** | - |
| Three Weeks | 0.00 | - | 0.06*** | - |
| Four Weeks | 0.00 | - | 0.04*** | - |
| Five or More Weeks | 0.00 | - | 0.04*** | - |
| Father's Income (logged) | 10.21 | 1.68 | 10.48*** | 1.40 |
| Mother's Income (logged) | 5.26 | 5.03 | 5.08 | 5.07 |
| Father Age | 32.80 | 6.95 | 32.89 | 6.25 |
| Mother Age | 29.97 | 5.91 | 30.36 | 5.59 |
| Both White ^a | 0.42 | - | 0.51*** | - |
| Both Black | 0.07 | - | 0.06 | - |
| Both Latino | 0.20 | - | 0.10*** | - |
| Both Other Race | 0.14 | - | 0.17 | - |
| Mixed Race | 0.17 | - | 0.16 | - |
| Father Education | 2.67 | 1.09 | 3.01*** | 1.00 |
| Professional Occupation ^a | 0.31 | - | 0.40*** | - |
| Labor Occupation | 0.43 | - | 0.35*** | - |
| Sales Occupation | 0.09 | - | 0.07 | - |
| Service Occupation | 0.14 | - | 0.16 | - |
| Other Occupation | 0.03 | - | 0.02 | - |
| Works Part-Time (Father) | 0.08 | - | 0.05** | - |
| Works Full-Time (Father) ^a | 0.46 | - | 0.49 | - |
| Works Overtime (Father) | 0.46 | - | 0.46 | - |
| Mother Education | 3.03 | 0.97 | 3.29*** | 0.85 |
| Works Part-Time (Mother) | 0.18 | - | 0.20 | - |
| Works Full-Time (Mother) ^a | 0.36 | - | 0.32 | - |
| Not Employed (Mother) | 0.46 | - | 0.48 | - |
| Religious Participation (Father) | 1.84 | 1.45 | 2.01* | 1.49 |
| Religious Participation (Mother) | 2.12 | 1.57 | 2.25 | 1.52 |
| Number of Other Children | 1.20 | 1.10 | 1.05** | 1.02 |
| Relationship Duration | 5.05 | 3.45 | 5.46** | 3.45 |
| Previously Married | 0.14 | - | 0.13 | - |
| Length of Maternity Leave | 1.39 | 2.09 | 1.60* | 2.13 |
| Relationship Conflict | 1.80 | 0.50 | 1.77 | 0.47 |
| N | 600 | | 4500 | |

^aUsed as reference category. Significant differences determined by two-tailed *t*-tests (**p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001).

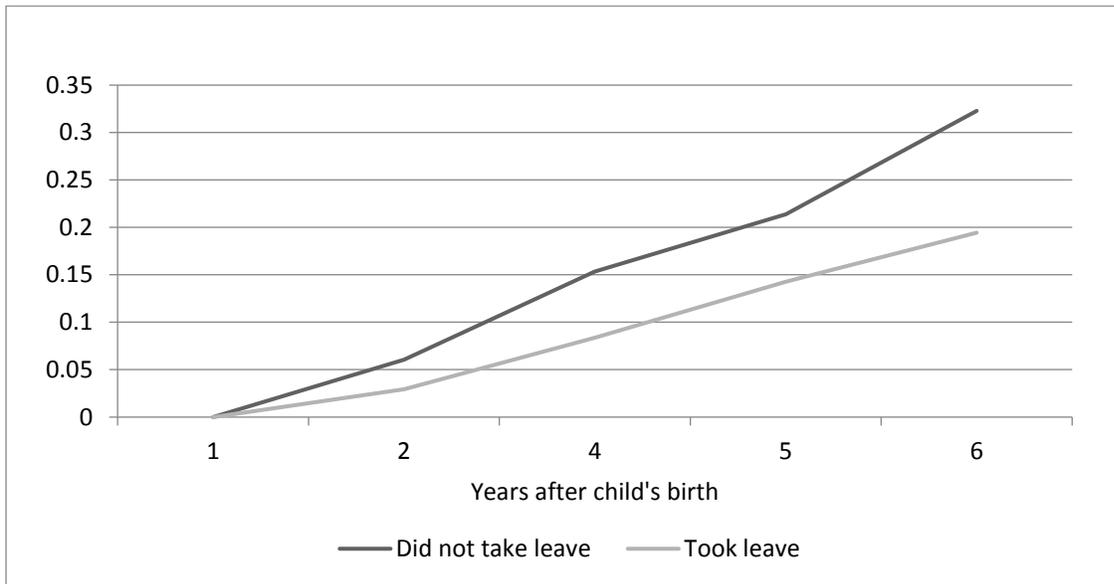
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Table 2. Results from Discrete-Time Logistic Event History Models Predicting Marital Dissolution

| Variable | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | <i>OR</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>OR</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>OR</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>OR</i> | <i>SE</i> |
| Paternity Leave-Taking | 0.68** | 0.09 | | | 0.68** | 0.10 | | |
| One Week or Less | | | 0.66** | 0.09 | | | 0.63** | 0.09 |
| Two Weeks | | | 0.68* | 0.11 | | | 0.73 | 0.13 |
| Three Weeks | | | 0.81 | 0.20 | | | 0.96 | 0.24 |
| Four Weeks | | | 0.47* | 0.14 | | | 0.51* | 0.16 |
| Five or More Weeks | | | 1.01 | 0.24 | | | 1.09 | 0.27 |
| Father's Income (logged) | | | | | 0.96 | 0.07 | 0.96 | 0.07 |
| Mother's Income (logged) | | | | | 0.92 | 0.12 | 0.92 | 0.12 |
| Father Age | | | | | 0.98 | 0.02 | 0.98 | 0.02 |
| Mother Age | | | | | 0.96 | 0.02 | 0.96 | 0.02 |
| Both Black | | | | | 2.08** | 0.52 | 2.07** | 0.52 |
| Both Latino | | | | | 0.65 | 0.16 | 0.65 | 0.16 |
| Both Other Race | | | | | 1.00 | 0.27 | 1.00 | 0.27 |
| Mixed Race | | | | | 1.42 | 0.26 | 1.43 | 0.26 |
| Father Education | | | | | 1.20 | 0.16 | 1.20 | 0.16 |
| Labor Occupation | | | | | 0.92 | 0.23 | 0.92 | 0.23 |
| Sales Occupation | | | | | 0.71 | 0.31 | 0.71 | 0.31 |
| Service Occupation | | | | | 0.82 | 0.23 | 0.81 | 0.23 |
| Other Occupation | | | | | 0.71 | 0.47 | 0.71 | 0.47 |
| Works Part-Time (Father) | | | | | 1.28 | 0.51 | 1.27 | 0.51 |
| Works Overtime (Father) | | | | | 0.89 | 0.19 | 0.89 | 0.19 |
| Not Employed (Father) | | | | | 0.51 | 0.47 | 0.52 | 0.47 |
| Mother Education | | | | | 0.54*** | 0.07 | 0.54*** | 0.07 |
| Works Part-Time (Mother) | | | | | 0.57* | 0.13 | 0.57* | 0.13 |
| Not Employed (Mother) | | | | | 0.37 | 0.46 | 0.36 | 0.46 |
| Religious Participation (Father) | | | | | 0.96 | 0.09 | 0.96 | 0.09 |
| Religious Participation (Mother) | | | | | 0.96 | 0.09 | 0.95 | 0.09 |
| Number of Other Children | | | | | 0.95 | 0.07 | 0.95 | 0.07 |
| Relationship Duration | | | | | 0.96 | 0.03 | 0.96 | 0.03 |
| Previously Married | | | | | 1.06 | 0.21 | 1.06 | 0.21 |
| Length of Maternity Leave | | | | | 0.97 | 0.04 | 0.97 | 0.04 |
| Relationship Conflict | | | | | 2.39*** | 0.36 | 2.39*** | 0.36 |
| Wave 2 | 0.79 | 0.26 | 0.80 | 0.26 | 0.51 | 0.19 | 0.51 | 0.19 |
| Wave 3 | 1.44 | 0.47 | 1.43 | 0.47 | 1.16 | 0.38 | 1.16 | 0.38 |
| Wave 4 (5 years old) | 0.88 | 0.30 | 0.88 | 0.30 | 0.80 | 0.27 | 0.80 | 0.27 |

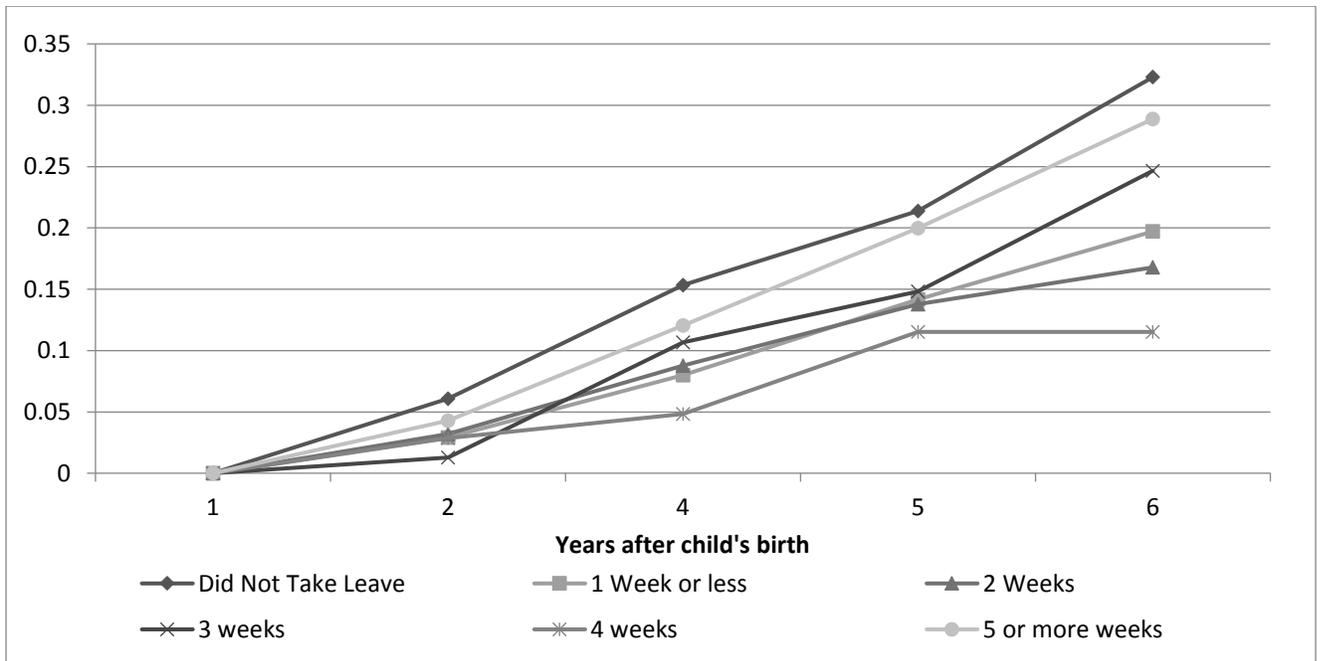
N = 5100 (17,800 person-years); Models are weighted using IPTW; **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Figure 1. Cumulative Dissolution Rate of Unions by Paternity Leave-Taking



Results taken from life-table estimates. Two-tailed *t*-tests indicate a significant difference in the risk of dissolution by leave-taking ($p < .001$).

Figure 2. Cumulative Dissolution Rate of Unions by Length of Paternity Leave



Results taken from life-table estimates. Two-tailed *t*-tests indicate that the risk of dissolution is higher among couples in which the father did not take leave ($p < .001$). Results also suggest that the risk of dissolution is lower among couples in which the father took one week or less or four weeks of leave compared to couples in which the father took five or more weeks of leave ($p < .05$).

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Table A1. Results Comparing Estimates from Models using Various Techniques to Account for Selection

| Variable | Unweighted Event History Model | | Weighted Event History Model | | Selection Model | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> |
| Paternity Leave-Taking | -0.42** | 0.13 | -0.36** | 0.14 | -0.04* | 0.02 |
| Length of Paternity Leave | | | | | | |
| One Week or Less | -0.48*** | 0.13 | -0.44** | 0.14 | -0.04** | 0.02 |
| Two Weeks | -0.37* | 0.16 | -0.29 | 0.18 | -0.02 | 0.02 |
| Three Weeks | -0.12 | 0.22 | 0.04 | 0.28 | 0.02 | 0.03 |
| Four Weeks | -0.71* | 0.30 | -0.66* | 0.31 | -0.08*** | 0.02 |
| Five or More Weeks | 0.04 | 0.23 | 0.11 | 0.25 | 0.01 | 0.03 |

Unweighted event history model estimates are taken from discrete time event history models that do not account for selection. Weighted event history model estimates are replicated from Table 2 (but regression coefficients are displayed instead of odds ratios to allow for more direct comparisons). Selection model estimates are taken from selection models predicting whether couples ever experienced dissolution. Propensity score models are used to estimate the influence of paternity leave-taking and augmented inverse propensity weighted estimates are used to estimate the influence of length of paternity leave.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.