

**Baby Mama Drama
(...or why his kids matter more than hers)**

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Introduction

Nearly 40 percent of children born in 2005 were born to unmarried parents (Hamilton, Martin and Ventura, 2006) and 10 percent of all children in the United States lives with a half-sibling, or a sibling with whom they have only one parent in common (Kreider and Fields, 2005). These two numbers represent a startling shift away from the married, two-parent nuclear family idealized in America. Many families now include more (and sometimes many more) than two parents, many of whom are never married to each other, and many children are now growing up in this new kind of family, one that is both less stable and more haphazard than the iconic American family.

Ultimately, the rise in non-marital childbearing, multiple-partner fertility and cohabitation as an alternative to marriage have profoundly altered the portrait of the American family. Research has shown that the families formed by these changing demographics are often highly unstable (Bumpass, Raley and Sweet 1995) and confer fewer benefits to either children or parents (Manning and Lamb, 2003). Yet despite the complexity and frailty of families formed in blended non-marital unions, little is known about how such families function, or what it is about their form that leads them to be so unstable. In this paper, I conduct an inductive examination of familial processes in unmarried multiple partner fertility families in an effort to understand their family trajectories.

Prior Literature

More than one third of babies born in the United States today have unmarried parents (Martin et al. 2006), up from about 5 percent in 1960 (Moore 1995). However, while the percentage of births to unmarried mothers has shifted, so have the families into which those children are born; the percentage of nonmarital births into cohabiting couple homes almost doubled between the early 1980s and 2001 (Mincieli, Manlove, McGarrett, Moore and Ryan, 2007), and now roughly half of all non-marital births are to cohabiting parents (Carlson, McLanahan and England 2004). Similarly, while the perception used to be that non-marital births occurred to single mothers, a recent national survey of nonmarital births

found that roughly 80 percent of nonmarital births are to parents who report that they were romantically involved at the time of the birth (ibid.).

However, it is clear that despite the increased prevalence of these unmarried but still two-parent families, the circumstances of both unmarried parents and their children have not markedly improved. Not only are low income, low education and minority men and women still more likely to have a nonmarital birth, but nonmarital births are associated with a higher incidence of poverty following the birth (Driscoll et al. 1999), in part due to the instability of the parental relationship and a low likelihood of receiving child support (Grail 2003). Additionally, there is evidence that unmarried fathers, like divorced fathers, often withdraw from contact with children after separation from the child's mother (Carlson, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn forthcoming), and the negative ramifications of a lack of father involvement are known to be far-reaching (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2004). Further, a nonmarital birth reduces the likelihood that the mother will marry (Bennett, Bloom and Miller 1995; Upchurch, Lillard and Panis 2001), and has been shown to have negative ramifications on the child's behavior and academic achievement later in life (Seltzer 2000; Wu and Martinson 1993).

Accompanying the rise in non-marital births, another challenge to the “normative” two-parent nuclear family has been the number of childbearing relationships that unmarried parents have. It was recently estimated that nearly 60% of all non-marital births were to couples in which at least one parent had a child by a prior relationship (Carlson and Furstenberg 2007). This practice of having children with more than one partner, known as multiple partner fertility, is much more common among unmarried parents than among married parents (Carlson and Furstenberg 2007), in part due to the greater risk of dissolution in non-marital childbearing relationships, which increases the hazard of multiple partner fertility.

Such families are the focus of this paper. Although there is little research to inform us about unmarried multiple partner fertility families, we do know that, more so than married or nuclear families, these families are often at risk. For example, we know that multiple partner fertility is correlated with early childbearing, being African-American, having low levels of education, and histories of substance

abuse or incarceration, and is three times higher among unmarried than among married parents (Carlson and Furstenberg 2007; Mincy 2002). Thus, the hazard of being in an unmarried stepfamily is much greater among the otherwise disadvantaged (Blank 1997; Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007).

As the prevalent family structures for the children of unmarried parents have shifted from single mother households to cohabiting two-parent families, many of which also include children from prior partnerships, social scientists have begun to rethink their framing of these families. In its simplest form, a stepfamily can be created by the coupling of two individuals, one of whom has children by a prior partner, leading many social scientists (for example, Bumpass, Raley and Sweet 1995; Stewart 2007) to argue that these unmarried blended families are stepfamilies, and should be studied as such. In this context, family processes in traditional, married stepfamilies may shed light on the patterns among unmarried multiple partner fertility families.

For example, we know from literature about married stepfamilies (although not necessarily multiple partner fertility married stepfamilies) that stepfamilies are generally found to be more problematic and less stable than nuclear families, with parent-stepparent relationships being more prone to conflict and dissolution. Largely due to this turbulence, the stepfamily form has been found to be detrimental to children (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Popenoe 1994). These difficulties have been theorized to have many different sources, ranging from an greater acceptance of divorce or relationship dissolution as a solution to a problematic relationship (Ganong and Coleman 2004) to “incomplete” institutionalization of the norms surrounding the stepfamily form (Cherlin 1978). However, whatever the cause, remarried couples have been repeatedly shown to be more likely to divorce than first marriages (Goldstein 1999), and that probability is especially subject to the presence of stepchildren (Booth and Edwards 1992).

Notably, however, the effects that stepchildren have appear to be different depending on whether they are his or her kids. Recent work has found that fathers having children by previous relationships is particularly problematic, in part because so few fathers are the custodial parent following a separation (Kreider and Fields 2005). For example, Carlson and Furstenberg (2007) report that it is the father’s

responsibility to non-coresidential children that causes problems, as his interaction with his children outside the home reduces his availability as a partner and co-parent and his child support payments are deducted from the family budget.

Nonetheless, although a child from a prior relationship is the defining factor for stepfamilies (Ganong and Coleman 2004), children are not the only source of problems for them; the prior partners of stepfamily parents are also believed to be a key factor in the difficulties these families face, and this is again particularly true of men's former partners. In father-stepmother families, it has been found that interaction with men's former spouses was a greater source of stress to new unions than were the stepchildren (Guisinger, Cowan and Schulberg 1989). Similarly, Coleman et al. (2001) find that disputes about and with former spouses are a major source of conflict for stepfamilies, most of which result from problems negotiating boundaries within and around stepfamilies. And in qualitative work using unmarried, low-income samples, mothers' jealousy and fears of renewed sexual intimacy between a father and his ex have been shown to be a significant source of conflict for parents (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Hill 2007). However, non-interaction is also problematic; in mother-stepfather families, the stepchildren's biological fathers (the mother's prior partners) are often uninvolved with their children, which is known to have negative ramifications for child development (Amato and Gilbreth 1999).

Given that over one third of all births are now to unmarried couples (Martin et al. 2006), half of whom are cohabiting (Carlson, McLanahan and England 2004) and nearly 60 percent of those are estimated to feature a parent with a child from a prior union (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006), these data suggest that roughly one in ten children born today is born into an unmarried stepfamily household. These children and their parents face challenges on three dimensions: non-marital fertility, multiple partner fertility and stepfamily living. Thus, the growing prevalence and apparent fragility of unmarried stepfamilies, and the advantages both children and adults glean from being in a stable, two parent family (see, for example, McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Waite and Gallagher 2000), all mandate a more in-depth understanding of the complex family dynamics of unmarried stepfamilies. In a context of incomplete information about these families, a push to get unmarried parents to the altar, and given what

we know both about the positive effects of stable marriage and about the frailty of unmarried stepfamilies, gaining a better understanding the family dynamics of unmarried couples with children by multiple partners is especially important.

The TLC3 Unmarried Stepfamily Sample

This paper uses data from the Time, Love and Cash among Couples with Children (TLC3) Study, an embedded qualitative study within the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. The Fragile Family Study is a nationally representative birth cohort study of approximately 3,700 unmarried couples with a new baby at the turn of the millennium, and a comparison sample of 1,200 married couples also with a new baby. Births were sampled from 75 hospitals in 20 large cities throughout the United States. Both mothers and fathers were surveyed shortly after the child's birth and were re-surveyed when the child was one, three, and five years of age. When weighted, the Fragile Families sample is representative of all births to parents in cities with populations over 200,000 (McLanahan et al. 2003).

To construct the TLC3 sample, interviewers recruited a stratified random sample of the full Fragile Families sample, but limited to couples romantically involved at the birth. As in the survey, unmarried births were oversampled and further sampling decisions were made to ensure representation of whites, blacks, and Latinos. The TLC3 sample was also restricted to couples who had reported household incomes of less than \$75,000 in the prior year, although the majority of couples (and particularly unmarried couples) had incomes far below that. For example, the average household income of TLC3 couples who were cohabiting was \$22,500, and the average earnings of the unmarried cohabiting fathers in the year preceding the focal birth was \$17,500 (Shafer 2007).

Interviews with the 75 couples recruited into the TLC3 sample began two to three months after the child was born, when the euphoria of birth had faded somewhat, but couples' hopes were still high. Parents were interviewed, both together as a couple and individually, in a series of focused, in-depth, qualitative interviews, regardless of whether they stayed together or broke up. Couple and individual

interviews were conducted shortly after the birth, and when the baby was approximately one, two, and four years old.

The Fragile Families and TLC3 datasets have many obvious strengths, such as in-depth instruments and a longitudinal design. However, for this analysis, TLC3 offers two additional benefits – the inclusion of extensive data on fathers, and thus also data on a broad range of stepfamily forms which permits a more complete picture of the lives of these unmarried stepfamilies than traditional research has allowed. That is, the families represented here include both couples where she brings a child into the relationship (similar to the re-married couples who are usually the subject of stepfamily research), as well as the less well understood couples where only the father has other children and couples in which both the mother and father have children from prior partnerships.

The basic question I address is how the presence of these children, his and hers, both inside or outside the household, affects couple dynamics. Drawing from rich couple narratives, I explore the ways in which these parents define themselves as parents and stepparents, and the ways they perceive the benefits and challenges of their divided and reconstituted families.

I focus on the twenty-seven TLC3 couples who were unmarried at the birth of their child, in which at least one of the parents had a child by a previous partner (regardless of the age or custodial status of these children), and for whom longitudinal data were available.¹ In five cases, only the mother has a child or children by a previous partner or partners, in eleven, only the father has any children by a previous partner and in the remaining eleven couples, both parents have at least one child by a previous partner. In all but three cases, all of the mothers' children live with the couple, while all of the fathers' children live elsewhere.² For two of these families with different residential patterns, both the mother's and the father's children live elsewhere, while in the final case, his other children live with the TLC3 couple.³

Although I draw on the widely understood vocabulary of remarried stepfamilies, available terms do not capture the complexity of typical familial relations in this unmarried stepfamily sample. For example, more than a quarter of these parents of other children have children with three or more partners,

and only four of the thirty-five parents of children by prior partners were ever married to any other parent. However, despite this complexity, in discussing these children and their parents, the TLC3 couples often simply refer to them as the “others”: his or her “other baby,” and the “other baby mama,” or “other baby daddy.” Therefore, in addition to the terminology of stepfamilies, I refer to the children that a parent had with someone else not only as stepchildren, but also as “other” children. Similarly, I call the parents of these other children the “other” parents and, occasionally, prior partners, although the later of these is not always temporally accurate as some parents go back and forth between partners (see Hill 2007).

The Analysis: Stepfamily Tensions

What follows is an inductive examination of four waves of qualitative interviews over a five year span with twenty-seven unmarried couples with both shared children and children by prior partners. These children by other partners set this sub-sample apart from the rest of the TLC3 parents; virtually all of the TLC3 mothers and fathers say they had had at least one serious romantic relationship prior to the focal partnership, but only 42 percent had children from those unions. Therefore, I limit my analysis to the couples for whom either the mother, the father, or both, have children from previous partnership. These parents range in age from 19 to 35, with a mean age of 24 years for women and 26 for men. Roughly 60 percent are African American, a third are Hispanic (largely Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Mexican American), and the remainder are white. Sixteen mothers and twenty-two fathers have children by prior partners, and for seven of the couples, the focal child was not the first they had had together.

The couple’s relationship history is taken from the baseline couple interview, while all other data are drawn from interviews conducted with each partner separately during each interview wave. I focus on those portions of parents’ narratives that dealt with the ongoing dynamics of the couple relationship, especially any conflict or problems the couple was facing, the parenting of children within the couple’s household, any information on contact with children outside the household, and any discussions of prior partners with whom parents have had children.

“It takes more than blood to be a parent.”

The central message these unmarried couples send is that it is investment and time that make a true parent, not shared genetics. Perhaps due to the prevalence of absent or incarcerated fathers, the biological parentage of a child is viewed as less important than fulfilling of the role of being a parent, which is evidenced in the amount of time, emotion, and personal and financial support that a partner invests in a child. Cache, who was 24 years old when she entered the study, is an African-American mother of four children by three different fathers. Her current partner is Raheem, the 22 year old (at the start of the study), African-American biological father of her youngest child. However, Raheem also plays the role of father of her two middle children. She says, “Raheem be both of their daddies, ‘cause he was with (my daughter) from the time she was born, and he was with my son since he was eight months.”⁴

The importance of stepfathers for these families should not be underestimated. In keeping with the general population, most mothers’ children by prior partners live with her, and in more than two-thirds of these cases, these children’s fathers were either not involved or only marginally involved with the child. Perhaps because of the absence of so many biological fathers, both the mothers and fathers in our story pointed to the primacy of the social father role.

Ali, an African American father of two biological children, both with his current partner, was 25 when he was first interviewed. He told us that he acted as father to all four children in their household, including his two stepchildren whose father was totally absent, saying, “my main point is, you know, as far as kids today in this society, it’s very important for (them to have a father figure)... it don’t have to be their father, but an authority figure, you know? Somebody to be around.” Similarly, Ted, a white father who was 34 years old when he was first interviewed says of his relationship with his stepson, “if he ever has a problem, I’ll be there for him. I consider that being a father.”

The importance of this involvement leads many couples to make a clear distinction between “fathers” and “daddies.” That is, in the words of many in this sample, while a “father” may share a genetic link with the children, the “daddy” is the one who raises the kids. Notably, other ethnographies

have also found this distinction (i.e., Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992), although in some samples, the meanings of the terms are reversed (i.e., Edin, *forthcoming*; Waller, 2002).

Beverly and Andre, both African American, were 24 and 22 years old, respectively, when we first interviewed them. The focal child is their first child together, although both have children by prior relationships; Andre has a daughter, and Beverly has two sons by two different men. When asked whether her boys had contact with their biological fathers, Beverly replied,

“I think it’s really important because a child needs to know their father...they need to know like, ‘he’s my dad and he’s the one who had [me with] my mom’ and all this and that. Like, my oldest son, he knows who his daddy is just as well as he knows who his father is also. (Interviewer: “And what’s the difference there?”) What’s the difference? Andre take care of him, his father don’t do anything for him, so when somebody says, ‘what’s your daddy’s name?’ he’s gonna tell him, ‘well, Andre is my daddy, but my real father’s name is [so and so]’ because he understands.”

Further, “daddy” is a title of considerable esteem, and being worthy of the title was deemed an achievement in which a man could take pride. Andre compares himself to the largely absent biological father of Beverly’s son, saying, “I made it clear to them that they can’t choose between me and him. I made it clear to them that I’m your daddy.” Andre feels he has worked hard to earn daddy status, and is unwilling to be supplanted just because he did not biologically father the boys.

On the flip side, however, many of the non-co-residential fathers in our sample are also adamant that it is not right for their other children’s mother to allow another man to replace them. Angel, a Hispanic father who was 31 years old when the study began, has three other children by three prior partners. When the new husband of one wanted custody of Angel’s daughter, Angel said, “as long as I’m breathing, sorry, can’t do it.” Similarly, Michelle, a white mother who was 20 years old when we first interviewed her, said her son’s father would not let her son call her current partner “dad.” “[His father] said, ‘that’s not his dad... that’ll never be until the day I die.’”

That these fathers stake such claims to their paternal identities is particularly noteworthy given how few of them are active in their non-co-residential children’s lives. While some of this father absence is likely due to either maternal gatekeeping or paternal disinterest in the responsibilities of fatherhood (see Claessens 2007), it is also important to note that one-quarter of the absent fathers are incarcerated at the

time the focal parents are first interviewed, and several more (including several focal fathers) spend time in jail over the course of the study. Thus, their non-involvement may not be voluntary and so the importance of staking claim to the title of “daddy” such that it lasts even when the father is absent may be particularly salient for these fathers.

Notably, no such semantic distinction exists for those mothers whose partners had other children, however; all made sure to make it clear that they were “stepmom” not “mommy.” This is probably both a reflection of the residential status of these children (in only one case does his other child live with the couple) as well as the importance and sanctity of the role of mother in those same communities (Edin & Kefalas 2005; Senior 1991).

“They are not MY kids, you know.”

Despite assertions that investment in children outweighs biology, the importance of biological ties is nonetheless still evident in these parental narratives. In all but two cases, parents make clear distinctions between “his” children and “her” children, although most are also quick to claim they don’t treat “his,” “hers,” and “our” kids differently. When interviewers asked Ted whether his partner received child support from her ex, he said “She doesn’t pursue it because I treat [her son] like he is mine. And I don’t slight him in any way. I don’t treat him any different.”

However, even as parents assert parallel treatment of other kids, there are apparent differences depending on whether stepchildren co-reside with the couple or not, a distinction which often results in differences for his and her children by prior partners. That is, co-residential children (usually hers) are more likely to be targeted for emotional and personal investment, and non-co-residential stepchildren (usually his) more often receive primarily financial support. Thus, Ted says of his stepson, who lives with them, “I’ll never turn my back on him - anything he needs and wants in life, I will help him achieve,” while Beverly says of buying clothes for her non-co-residential stepdaughter that, “we (spend) the same amount of money as we do on our other kids.” Moreover, three other stepmothers of non-co-residential stepchildren claimed they bought clothing or presents for their partners’ other children

whenever they bought their own children something. None, though, told stories of more maternal activities such as reading to, or cuddling with these children, even though the children often visited on weekends, holidays, and during summer vacation.

Further, fathers' non-co-residential children are a source of conflict in these couples, while mothers' co-residential children are usually not. In fact, in keeping with recent work using the Fragile Families dataset (Carlson and Furstenberg, 2007), I find that co-residential stepchildren seem to be a stabilizing factor and a force of cohesion for many couples, at least when the men embrace the “daddy” role. In sharp contrast, his other children living elsewhere often destabilize the couple relationship because they detract from time available to the couple or their shared family.

One of the mothers offers an example; LaShawnda is a 27 year old African American mother of two, the oldest by another partner, at the outset of the study. Her partner Tyrone was 29, and also had a child from a prior relationship. She says that,

“...on [Tyrone's] off day he goes (and) gets his other daughter and she comes over and stay, so... we never have any time to ourselves ...I think maybe he feel like, since he's not [living] with his other daughter, you know, she probably feeling left out so he wanted [to be with her]. But...me and him still needs to spend time together, just the two of us.”

LaShawnda says she understands how important it is for Tyrone to be a good father to his other daughter, but she still feels that she and her daughters pay a price.

In addition to concerns about fathers' practical availability, mothers are also sometimes jealous of their partner's emotional tie with his other children. Gabriella, a Puerto Rican mother of one, was 22 years old when she was first interviewed. Her African American partner, Travis, is three years older than she is and has two other children, and Gabriella notes that she feels that Travis dotes more on “his” children than on their shared child, saying, “Sometimes I, I'll see that he love his other kids more than what he do...the baby... He say he love 'em all the same, but...I think he care more about them than what he do for [the new baby.]”

Fathers' children by prior relationships present a unique challenge to mothers as the emotional attachment to the child is rarely severed by the break-up of the parents, and when fathers were

demonstrative with children who represent his ties outside their own families, mothers were stung by the divided loyalties. Thus, even though Gabriella recognizes the unfairness of wanting her partner to dote on the focal child in the same way as he does his other children on the zoo trip, saying, “he (always says) ‘I miss my kids! I got to get my kids!’ ...I think probably cause he live here with me, he sees the baby every day (and) he don’t see them like he sees her so that’s probably why (he makes a fuss when he sees them),” this still does nothing to lessen her feelings of hurt when she sees his overt affection for his other family.

“The problem I have is the past.”

Non-co-resident children by prior partners are also the source of another common tension: conflict with, and jealousy of, the other parent of those children. The colloquial name for this conflict with and over prior partners, “baby mama drama,” reflects the fact that they are his, more often than her, prior partners who are the cause of this conflict. Andre explains why his visits to his other children seem to provoke so much tension with his partner, saying, “the streets say, ‘you got a baby, and your baby’s daddy got another girlfriend’ - it’s the streets that tell you that you got to fight [the other baby’s mother].” Other families concurred with stories of changed plans, withheld visitation or even physical confrontations with the other baby mama (and only occasionally the other baby daddy) that occur with a frequency that made them seem, as Andre implies, almost obligatory.

While some of this conflict is likely due to the difficulty of co-parenting across households, there is also often a decidedly sexual element, with many parents saying that the reason the prior partners seek out these fights is jealousy of the new relationship. Andre says that neither he nor his current partner Beverly gets along with his ex partner because “misery likes company. She don’t want you to have what (she) don’t have.” Further, parents report that other mothers often seek to antagonize current partners by preying on fears of infidelity. Several mothers told stories of fathers’ past partners calling them to insinuate they had an ongoing sexual relationship with the father. Even though no one reported that the

allegations were true, most mothers reported that it did bother them; LaShawnda says, “the problem I have is the past – (his) baby mama, that’s my problem.”

This high level of sexual jealousy may seem extreme, but given the history of these relationships, parents’ rationale becomes evident. In ten of the twenty-seven couples I analyze here, at least one of the pair was either involved with someone else or very newly “single” when the couple met. In fact, four of the fathers have other children the same age as the focal child, indicating that they were having sex with at least two women at roughly the same time. Where one relationship ends and another begins is thus not always clear, and these blurred boundaries give fears of infidelity with a prior partner an added edge.

And often the war of baby mama drama is waged using children. Lauren, a black mother of two children by a prior marriage who was 27 years old when she was first interviewed, says that the biggest problem in her relationship with her 26 year old partner, Michael, who has 3 children by a prior marriage, is conflict with his ex. She said, “there was a lot of drama with her... she would keep the kids from him because me and him were together... it was a big mess - baby mama drama.” Similarly, Gabriella says of the mother of Travis’ other kids,

“She’ll use her kids... ‘cause she knows he love his kids, seems like he can’t be a whole week without ‘em (or) he’ll get depressed, (saying) ‘I miss my kids. I haven’t seen my kids.’ And she know that (if) she don’t let him see the kids, he fittin’ to be like sweating her. He fittin’ to be on the phone like ‘can I please see my kids? Lemme see my kids. Why you don’t let me see my kids. Let me just see ‘em, at least for five minutes.’ So she’ll just hang up and he’ll call back. And it’s like she loving it, you know. So he’ll go to the house and knock. She won’t open. He’ll leave and be feeling depressed (and) that’s how she’ll use the kids like that.”

In contrast to baby mama drama, conflict with or over mother’s prior partners is both more explicitly jealous in nature and exists for far less tangible reasons. For example, while Beverly and Andre struggle to survive the frequent onslaughts of Andre’s prior partner, Andre seems consumed with jealousy over Beverly’s only occasional contact with her other baby’s father. He says he tells her, “he can’t have you all... I want all the love to myself. I want him to get *none*, because he gave up his [girlfriend] and kids. And he had the right to [be daddy, but] he gave that up.”

Seven of the 15 men who acted as stepfathers reported jealousy of their partner's other baby daddy, but these conflicts seldom rise to the level that might earn the designation "baby daddy drama," probably largely due to how few of these other fathers are involved in their children's lives. Travis defended his feelings, saying, "I know from experience that the baby daddy can always have his way of coming back. It may not be sexually or mentally, but he's got some kind of involvement in that woman's life, a part that still cares for him." Even so, the paucity of stories of interactions with the other baby daddies suggests that this concern may be largely unnecessary.

The Frailties and Strengths of Blended Families:

The "Successes" and the "Failures"

Questions of stability loom large for these unmarried stepfamilies. Will their relationships succeed or fail? And how will their complex family lives affect their ability and willingness to stay together as a family? Interestingly, I find that "success" for these unmarried stepfamilies takes two forms; seven of the 27 couples manage to get married by the study's end, about four years after the birth of the focal child,⁵ while another fourteen "succeed" simply by making it to their child's fourth birthday without separating. The remaining six are broken up by the end of the study, as is one of the couples who marries.⁶ To explain the variations between these groups, I highlight three couples who exemplify the three primary patterns.

Couples Who Separate

Camille and Freddie are young, 19 and 20 respectively, when their first child together is born just before they were first interviewed; Camille is African American and Freddie is Hispanic. They had met and flirted briefly at a mall in early adolescence, but were then out of touch for several years before they met again and began dating in earnest, just over a year before the birth. Those intervening years prove important to their story as during that time Freddie had two children with another woman.

Camille's pregnancy with the TLC3 focal child, a girl, was unplanned and unexpected. Both Camille and Freddie say that they wanted to have a child together eventually, but felt unprepared for a child at that time. Camille was especially ambivalent because of Freddie's past and his other family. Freddie said, "Camille wants to be with somebody who doesn't drink, doesn't smoke... isn't a drug user... somebody who has a good education, good morals, goals, and no kids... I might have only been her guy on looks."

By the time their daughter was born, the couple was living together some of the time, though Freddie went back and forth between her house and his mother's. From the very beginning, his other kids and their mother were a common source of conflict. According to Freddie, "when the pregnancy came about... we started talking a lot about my kids," and, "her whole issue was, you know, she didn't know if she was going to be able to handle my having kids with somebody else." "When (Camille) looks at my kids, she knows that they're a part of me, but they're also a part of somebody else. And I don't think Camille is going to be able to live with the fact that I'm connected to somebody else, another female." His exasperation with her unwillingness to accept his other family is obvious as he re-enacts his side of a recurring argument, "Obviously you do not like the fact that I have kids. (So) why did you continue the relationship KNOWING that I had kids? It's not like the kids are going to one day disappear."

Camille, however, points to the hard realities of how Freddie's "past" will continue to affect her own life, saying, "I never want to have kids with someone who had kids, you know, for all the reasons that goes along with it – this girl (the mother of Freddie's other children) is going to be in my life forever, you know.... (we) are always including (his other kids) and (she) is right there. [That's not fair to me because] they're not my kids." Camille and Freddie separate and reunite several times in the months following their daughter's birth, but by the time their child turns two, both claim their relationship is over for good. While Freddie's other family doesn't seem to be the primary reason for breakup (she points to his infidelity and his lack of ambition while he points to her constant jealousy), it nonetheless clearly plays at least a secondary role.

The distinction between his and her children seems central to which of these couples' relationships dissolve. While in only three of the seven who break up does the mother have any children by a previous partner, all seven contain fathers with other children, and four of these are explicit about the fact that their problems were, at least in part, caused by his "baby mama drama."

However, like Camille and Freddie, the other couples who break up are also plagued with other problems from the outset. Three are together only briefly, breaking up during their child's first year of life. Three of the seven have violent fights. One father is a drug addict, and a second is in and out of jail for drug dealing and domestic violence. A third father is involved in both drugs and crime and, by his own admission, "can't" be faithful to just one woman (and has five other children by four women when the couple's focal child is born). A fourth couple got together while the father was on a "break" from another partner with whom he has a child, and to whom he returned after his separation from the focal mother.

Obviously, the causal direction is not clear. However, prior research (see, for example, Biglan, Brennan, Foster & Holder, 2004) suggests that an underlying pattern of problem behaviors (including unprotected sex with multiple partners) may in fact be the cause of some of the couples' multiple partner fertility, rather than the result of it. For this reason, it is perhaps unsurprising that this subset of couples contains those parents with children with the greatest number of other partners. At the birth of the focal child, three of the fourteen parents in this group have children with at least three partners, and another five parents have had children with at least three partners by the end of the study.

Another feature of these couple relationships further bolsters this view; these are the couples in which the fathers are least involved with any of the co-residential children. It is possible that their problem behaviors limit their paternal involvement with their co-residential biological children and prohibit them from embracing the daddy role with regard to their stepchildren; this lack of paternal investment may, in turn, make relationships more subject to dissolution. The fact that many of these parents who separate from the other focal parent re-partner with someone new by the end of the study lends further credence to the importance mothers place on having father figures for their children and the

significance of paternal investment for familial stability. For example, five of these seven mothers go on to date (and three to marry) other men who step in to be “daddy” to their children, even over the brief four year window of the TLC3 study. These social fathers, by the mothers’ testimony, are filling the void left by the focal fathers and prior partners who seemed unwilling to become involved even when they lived with their children.

Couples Who Marry

LaShawnda and Tyrone, who are both African American, are 27 and 29 years old respectively at the beginning of the study. Both have children by prior relationships; LaShawnda has a daughter whose father is incarcerated, while Tyrone has a daughter with whom he is in regular contact. Like Camille and Freddie, they knew each other and dated briefly several years before becoming a serious couple. After an interlude of over a decade, during which both had children with someone else, they ran into each other again on a train platform. They started dating again shortly thereafter, moving in together within a year.

As was true for Camille and Freddie, Tyrone’s other child and her mother prove problematic for the couple from the beginning. LaShawnda complained once about the frequent intrusion of his other daughter into their own family time, but his response was not what she had hoped for; “he was trying to say as if, you know, I didn’t like his daughter. And I never said anything about [that]. It’s kind of messed up with that situation. That’s like the biggest problem (we have) – his other daughter and her mother.” According to LaShawnda, not only was his other child jealous of their daughter, but the other mother was “controlling” and treated Tyrone in a degrading manner; LaShawnda was frustrated that he refused to take a stand with her.

As time goes by, Tyrone sees his other daughter less and less and LaShawnda and Tyrone get married. The wedding seems a natural step for the two. As LaShawnda says, “we had a baby and we was living together already, so (we were) in a committed relationship,” and Tyrone added, “I just felt like it was the time to ask her to marry (me).” However, the price of this couple’s stability seems to be the severing of ties between Tyrone and his other daughter. By the time the focal child is four, Tyrone hasn’t

seen or talked to the other daughter for at least six months. LaShawnda says the girl's mother is keeping him from his daughter because she's jealous over their wedding, "its like, after we got married, he (wasn't) able to see her. (Our marriage) was a big thing (for the other mom). You know, before we were married, he could see (his daughter). He'd get her on his off days. Then once we like said 'I do,' well 'I don't want my daughter over there' and things like that."

Notably, these couples are almost as likely to include a father with children outside the home (six out of seven) as fathers in couples who break up, though far fewer couples contain ONLY a father's non-co-resident children (one out of seven versus four out of seven).¹ However, for these couples, father's involvement with other children versus investment in the new blended family seems to be a zero sum game. In all cases, the new family wins out.

Most striking about the families who marry is that all but two of the focal fathers either start off as, or become over the course of the study, absent fathers to their other children outside the home. This non-involvement of fathers with their non-co-residential children appears to be a key factor in allowing these families to overcome some of the challenges of stepfamily life. Thus, although LaShawnda fumes when the mother of Tyrone's daughter no longer allows him to see his child, it is also clear that a source of tension has been removed. Without regular visitation with their other children, these fathers have reduced interaction with former partners, and the baby mamma drama that so frequently plagued the couples who break up is a fairly rare event among these couples. In fact, the only couple that does report this kind of ongoing tension divorces soon after their marriage. This is also true of the non-involvement of the fathers of her other children, although to a far lesser extent.

Moreover, all but one of these households contain at least one co-residential stepchild, and the investment of these stepparents in those co-resident stepchildren also appears to buffer these families against some of the problems faced by the couples who separate. For example, LaShawnda and Tyrone clearly perceive the intrusion of his other daughter in their lives, while no such problem exists with her

¹ In four of the seven couples who marry, both parents have children by other partners, and in the remaining three, one mother and two fathers have other children, respectively.

other daughter, who lives with the couple. Although her daughter is not his biological child, the family has grown up around her and her presence is accepted in the same way as their daughter together. Other couples were similarly explicit about the parental roles that stepparents took with co-residential stepchildren.

Thus, little or no interaction with outside influences, particularly his other children and their mothers, serves to strengthen (or at least, reduce distractions from) the new family's bond. A key source of sexual jealousy and persistent conflict is gone, and with the additional absence of her children's fathers, any reminder that the co-resident stepchildren are not actually shared biological children is removed. The end result is greatly simplified familial interactions, which appears to be part of what enables these couples to marry.

Couples Who Stay Together But Do Not Marry

Gabriella and Travis were introduced earlier. Gabriella is a twenty-two year old Puerto Rican mother of two children - a son by a prior relationship, and a daughter with Travis, the focal father. Travis is black, was 25 when he was first interviewed, and had two other children with another woman when his daughter with Gabriella was born. The couple is living together at baseline, along with their daughter and Gabriella's son. Travis's other children live elsewhere, but he is in fairly regular contact with them. Gabriella and Travis met and began dating less than a year before the birth of their child, and while they have had some brief separations, they have basically been together ever since.

From the very first interview, the problems of their "blended" family are evident. Gabriella was jealous of the attention that Travis paid to his other children when they all spent time together, and her jealousy led Travis to be secretive about the visits he makes to see those children at their mother's home. When Gabriella discovered that Travis had taken his other children and their mother to a WIC⁷ appointment, she was outraged. His outrage in response matched hers: "I'm not gonna tell you no more when I'm going go over there if you fittin' to keep on getting mad! I'm just gonna go over there, and I'm not even fittin' to let you know when...." However, the problems are not merely a product of Gabriella's

imagination. Both agree that the other mother seems set on creating problems for Gabriella and Travis's family, abruptly refusing to grant Travis access to the children or trying to find ways of keeping Travis at her house long enough to make Gabriella worry. In contrast, the father of Gabriella's older child is nowhere to be seen.

One year after the birth of their baby, the couple is still together and Gabriella is pregnant with their second child. Meanwhile Travis's relationship with his other children and their mother continues to cause turmoil. Gabriella doesn't mind if he sees his children so long as he does so at his own mother's (the children's grandmother's) home and not his ex partner's apartment. Travis explains, "she care (if) I was over [at the other mother's house] to get them – messing with the mama. Because the other babies' mama plays some games... That's a promise [the other mother] made to me a long time ago. She said she would do anything to have me [and] if she couldn't have me then nobody would have me... She promised me that she would make sure she would interfere with anything."

By their first child's second birthday, this couple says their problems with the other mother continue, although they are alleviated somewhat by the fact that she is now denying him access to his children more frequently. Gabriella says she does so out of jealousy over the apparent success of Travis's new relationship, and so while Travis still pays child support for these children, he is only rarely allowed to see them. However, this jealousy is not one-sided; in the three years they have been together, Gabriella's discovery of Travis's secret visits to see his kids have caused brief breakups, while the other mother's jealousy and game-playing briefly landed Travis in jail after she falsely accused him of beating her, a charge she later recanted.

Problems continued into the fourth year of the study. Travis is back in contact with his other children, but the other mother continues to be antagonistic toward both Travis and Gabriella. Travis's child support payments also cause them some conflict, as Gabriella feels that the outflow of money threatens her own family's financial stability. Gabriella and Travis keep their finances separate as a result, even though they have now been living together for more than five years and have two children together. The couple say they have discussed the possibility of marriage only once, and although neither

parent thinks the relationship is on the verge of breakup, neither do they say that they think it is necessarily a permanent arrangement.

Among the couples who stay together without marriage, again it is the roles that men take with regards to their children that appear to be the defining feature. Central to these stories is the fathers' continued involvement with all of the parents' children: his children living outside the household, her children living with the couple, and the couple's children together. For example, despite Gabriella's concern at the beginning of our study that Travis might love his other children more than their baby, two years later, she is convinced that he is the "kind of father (who) love (all) his kids." They and the other couples who remain together without marriage are distinct from the couples who break up in that the men are generally invested in both their own children (both inside and outside the home) and in their roles as stepfathers.

Further, the treatment of co-residential stepchildren as one would one's own children is more the rule than the exception among the unmarried success stories; four of the seven unmarried couples with co-residential stepchildren⁸ are explicit that the father is "daddy" to her kids, which is indicative of these fathers' investment in these stepchildren. However, unlike fathers in couples who eventually marry, for these couples, investment in non-co-resident children doesn't dwindle – virtually all of these fathers remained in contact with their other children throughout the course of the study. The fact that these fathers maintain their allegiances to multiple families may be what prevents these families from making the transition to marriage.

Another common characteristic of this group is that in seven of the nine couples in which the mother has a child by a previous partner, the other fathers are not involved with those children. As with the couples who eventually marry, this fact may contribute to their ability to stay together. That is, while the distracting ongoing presence of prior partners in the couples' lives are a notable presence in those families that "fail" and notably absent among the couples who marry, among these unmarried-but-still-together families, the absence of at least the one of the other parents, the other father, may insulate them somewhat from the risks imposed by the complex family form they've ended up in.

It is clear from Gabriella and Travis’s ongoing story that these two factors have played a significant role in keeping them on their particular trajectory. His continued involvement with his other children, and, more importantly, the fact that this involvement allows the children’s other mother to continue to cause “baby mama drama” places continual stress on the relationship. However, Tyrone, like most other fathers in this group, faces no competition from another man in his quest to fulfill the daddy role in the life of Gabriella’s oldest son, which is a unique point of simplicity in otherwise complex family lives.

Discussion & Conclusion

Like married stepfamilies, unmarried couples with children by multiple partners must navigate the difficult, and often competing, roles of partner, parent, ex and stepparent, frequently all at the same time. However, unlike married stepfamilies, they must do it without the legal guarantees of marriage or formal visitation arrangements with their former partners. It is also true that, on average, there are simply more children involved in these couples’ lives, and by more partners. For these complex families, it is clear that the fact that one or both parents have children by prior partners at the outset plays a key role in the kind of families they become over time.

Investment and involvement appear to be the key factors for both stability and matrimony for these unmarried stepfamilies, although the effects appear to be different for children inside and outside the home. A stepparent’s investment in and involvement with co-residential stepchildren seems to cement the family together, while a stepparent who maintains emotional distance from co-residential stepchildren is more likely to separate from the other parent. In contrast, a *parent*’s investment and involvement with non-co-residential other children often proves divisive, detracting from time and attention available to the new family, while reduced or non-involvement over time allows the new family to solidify and stabilize.

This is particularly evident for fathers, for whom investment in the new family unit, and freedom from the distraction of the old, are key factors for both staying together and making the transition to

marriage. This presents men with a paradox that mothers don't often face; staying involved with children from prior partnerships may be beneficial from the standpoint of those children, but detrimental from the standpoint of the children he has with a new partner. In sum, in the most successful couples, mothers replace other fathers with stepfathers and fathers replace other children with stepchildren, and the cost of their success is that virtually all relationships outside of the nuclear family are severed.⁹

Moreover, although the presence or absence of his and her other children is clearly an important determinant of couple outcomes, this does not appear to have much to do with characteristics of the children in question. There is no evidence in these data that the co-residential stepchildren of the couples who marry are somehow less divisive or easier to parent than the co-residential stepchildren of the couples who separate. Similarly, there is nothing in these data to indicate that the non-co-residential children from whom fathers eventually disengage are somehow more difficult than the non-co-residential children with whom the unmarried fathers remain involved. Instead, the primary problem with ongoing contact with children outside the home is that it draws the new couple into an ongoing relationship with the other baby's mother, and it is the baby mama drama that often appears to be an important impediment to marriage.

Further, while it is likely that some of these fathers do simply choose to disengage from their other children to focus on their new families (though no father I analyzed admitted to doing so), it is also quite clear from these narratives that mothers who encourage all of their children, both shared and unshared, to refer to the new father as "daddy" are taking steps to shift the allegiances of their children from the other fathers to the TLC3 focal fathers. As Claessens (2007) finds, although mothers often report after a break-up that an absent father chose to disengage, the "absent" fathers often counter that the mother often does not allow them to see their children, thus preventing their involvement. As such, Claessens suggests that father absence may be reached more communally than was previously believed, and these results similarly imply that mothers may actively encourage the swapping of allegiances by the father from his prior family to the new family. This begs the question of whether the other father loses interest prior to the formation of the mother's new family, thus clearing the way for the new partner to

embrace the role of daddy unimpeded, or whether it is the new relationship that lowers the biological father's engagement, either because he perceives the new partner as too much competition or because the mother gradually pushes him out in favor of the new stepfather. These data is consistent with both views.

However, it is clear that in order to be deemed a successful daddy, a stepfather must offer far more than mere financial support. Roughly half of all parents in all three groups either pool finances or report that they share expenses at the time of the focal child's birth, and there is no clear link between the level of financial support the father has been giving the mother (all of these fathers give some) and the father/daddy distinction. That is, stepfathers don't seem to be "earning" the title of daddy simply by supporting the mother and her co-residential children financially. This suggests that when parents stress the importance of "being there" as a threshold for daddyhood, they mean it—stepfathers must be physically present, emotionally invested, and personally involved to be "daddy."

However, the nature of the sample begs the question of how much of what I find is pervasive across multiple partner fertility families, and how much is due to the fact that these couples are (or were) unmarried while they had children. Although the data at hand are insufficient to draw definitive conclusions about the role of non-marital childbearing in these outcomes, the TLC3 dataset does include a small comparison sample of married families which allows me to at least explore the role that the non-marital status of these couples plays in their familial processes and outcomes.

Of the 26 TLC3 couples who were married at baseline, six couples feature both longitudinal data and children by prior partners, and although this sample is small, it nonetheless allows some potential insight into the role of marriage (or the lack thereof) in these patterns.¹⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the married stepfamily parents are older than the unmarried stepfamily parents. The married mothers range in age from 21 to 38 years old, with an average age of 30 (unmarried mothers have an average age of 24), while the married fathers range in age from 23 to 40, with an average age of 32 (compared to 26 among the unmarrieds). They are also generally wealthier and have higher levels of education. However, they are similar to the unmarried couples in that all are minorities; in five of the six couples, both parents are black, while in the remaining couple, both parents are Hispanic. In two of the couples, only the mother

has children by another partner, while in three, only the father does. In the remaining family, both parents have children by prior partners. All of the mothers' children co-reside with the couple, and in two of the families, the fathers' children do as well. In three of the families, the focal birth is not the first child that the couple has had together.

Family dynamics among these married stepfamilies concur with some of the processes described for the unmarrieds, and deviate in important ways with others. For example, in four of the five households with co-residential stepchildren, the parents are explicit about the parental role that their partner takes with their children, saying, “she has always been like a mother to them,” and, “I’m the only father they know.” In this, they closely mirror the behaviors and attitudes of the unmarried couples who invest heavily in their partners' children. Further, only one of the married parents was ever married to the other parent of their other child, a proportion almost exactly the same as that of the unmarried parents. Also notable is the fact that virtually all of the children in both the married and unmarried stepfamilies were unplanned and the married parents are no more likely to report that they planned any child than are the unmarried parents.

Additionally, all but one of the married stepfamilies include co-residential stepchildren and, similar to the unmarried stepfamilies, these married parents are equally explicit about the difficulties caused by their blended families. Sean, a 32 year-old black father whose partner has two daughters by two different men, explained the situation saying, “it’s hard when you’re dealing in a marriage and you’ve got other kids involved that’s not yours.” Even though these problems are neither as pervasive nor as severe as they are in the unmarried sample, the effects are still evident. In fact, one mother reports in the first interview that she is considering divorce, and although she never pursues it further, she and the focal father do separate repeatedly over the course of the study. A second couple also reports a separation as of the final interview¹¹. Moreover, despite the fact that both couples report multiple problems prompting their separations, both also report that stepfamily conflict is a primary concern.

However, the tenor of the conflicts is different among the married couples than it is among the unmarrieds. Sean, the father quoted above, goes on to clarify, saying, “it’s up to the parent, the biological

parent of those kids, to back you up or the child will never respect you.” His statement is emblematic, as it highlights a key difference between married and unmarried stepfamilies in this sample. That is, in contrast to the unmarried stepfamilies, the married stepfamilies report that it is the children by previous partners, rather than the previous partners themselves, who are the cause of problems in their blended families. Whereas among the unmarried couples, stepfamily conflict appears to center on issues of sexual jealousy between current and former partners, when the married parents report issues relating to their stepfamily status, it is largely tension around how to parent non-shared children and how parents and stepparents perceive their parental roles, but not conflict with the other parent.

Of course, that may be due to another key contrast between the samples, which is that the other mothers are nowhere near as present in these married multiple partner fertility families as they are in the unmarried stepfamilies. Notably, in two of the four couples in which the father has children by another partner, he actually has physical custody of those children and the other mother is largely or completely absent, while in another couple, the father is in only infrequent contact with his non-co-resident other children. However, it is striking that in the two families in which the other mother is not absent, the parents report not just a lack of problems, but actually say that they are on good terms with his other children’s mother. That the married parents report either no or amicable relationships with the “other baby mamas” is in complete contrast to the havoc typically wreaked by the other mothers among the unmarried couples. It is impossible to know whether lower levels of jealousy promote marriage or whether marriage itself, perhaps because it is a formal statement of commitment and monogamy, reduces jealousy. Nonetheless, it is clear that those couples who marry experience lower levels of sexual jealousy with regards to prior partners.

However, there are also circumstantial differences between the two samples that may be equally significant. For example, all but one of the married couples were married to each other when their first child together was born, a polar opposite to the unmarried couples. The timing of pregnancies with different partners is also dissimilar. All of the married parents report at least a two-year lag between a child with another partner and their first child with the other focal parent, as do all of the unmarried

parents who marry the other focal parent over the course of the study. However, among the unmarried parents who do not marry, more than a third report a duration of two years or less between births by different partners, and four fathers report a birth to another mother that is simultaneous to the focal birth, and so the rapidity of their multiple partner fertility serves to maximize the likelihood of sexual jealousy.

Yet, despite these differences, the striking finding for the married couples lies in the central similarity to the unmarried couples with children by multiple partners. Among these married stepfamilies, the most successful stepfamilies are those which most closely resemble nuclear families, with co-residential stepchildren being incorporated into a nuclear family model, stepparents taking active parental roles with all children, and previous partners and non-co-residential children being largely or completely absent. Further, I find that a failure to effectively blend families, and specifically a failure to incorporate a stepparent into a parental role with regard to co-residential stepchildren, appears to result in significant couple conflict and greatly increases the risk of separation among these married stepfamilies. Both of these patterns parallel my findings regarding the success and failure of the unmarried multiple partner fertility couples, although the gender roles are less clear given the anomalous fact that half (two of the four) of the fathers of other children have custody of those children.¹²

Conclusion

All of this amounts to a portrait of unmarried stepfamilies that in many ways is both very familiar and still novel. In concert with the large literature (and my own findings) regarding married stepfamilies, it is clear that unmarried stepfamily relationships, both current and former, are complex, although here these complexities are compounded by the families' non-marital status and fertility patterns, particularly those of men. Clearly, unmarried stepfamilies have particular challenges and concerns that must be addressed before couples will move into marriage. Further, it is crucial that we recognize that though marriage might lead to benefits for the children who live with the couple, it appears to be associated with losses for those who do not, and prevailing custody arrangements and men's fertility patterns mean that these fathers lose out no matter the outcome. In short, in these circumstances, marriage might well build

one family but divide another. Thus, these complicated blended families pose additional challenges to policy makers as the positive effects of marriage are clearly not universal in unmarried multiple partner fertility families.

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¹ Of the 48 couples who were unmarried at the birth of their child, two couples were excluded from the analysis because they dropped out of the study after the first interview, and an additional thirteen couples were excluded because neither parent had a child with someone else, either at baseline or over the course of our observations. Of the thirty-three couples who did feature children by prior partners, six additional couples were excluded for a variety of reasons; one couple was dropped due to insufficient data, one because the paternity of the potential child with another partner was in question, two because the partnership that resulted in the stepfamily was subsequent to the dissolution of the TLC3 focal family and resulted in only one wave of available data for those families, one because all of her other children were killed in a car accident prior to the birth of the TLC3 focal child, and one because the other partner was pregnant but had not yet had the child as of the final interview.

² It is also important to note that while this sample consists entirely of couples who already had children by other partners at the baseline interview, several of these stepfamilies become even more complex over the course of our observations (for example, the couple separates and a parent re-partners), several parents have more children with new partners, and two additional unmarried families who did not have other children at baseline, and who are excluded from this sample due to data limitations, become unmarried stepfamilies over the course of the study.

³ In determining child residence, I rely on the parents' very general descriptions of the primary residence of these children, although it is important to note that few speak in terms of formal or legal custody arrangements, and many children do occasionally stay overnight with their non-co-residential parent.

⁴ Due to a preterm delivery, Chanell's two children were born eight months apart.

⁵ One of the couples (Lauren and Michael) both marry and divorce over the course of the study, and so they are counted among both the married and the separated couples.

⁶ I define couples as broken up only if the parents say that the romantic relationship between the parents is over for good; given this, I do not count as dissolved those couples who separate briefly over the course of the study but reunite quickly.

⁷ The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

⁸ All of the co-residential children in these seven families are the children of the mother by a prior relationship, but notably two additional mothers have other children who do not live with them.

⁹ Others have found similar patterns of father involvement, although they find that the strongest predictor of reduced father involvement with non-coresident children is having a new biological child in the father's household (Manning, Stewart & Smock, 2003; Manning & Smock, 1999; Manning & Smock, 2000). As all of the TLC3 couples feature a new shared child when we first interview them, the patterns I find here can be seen as a further specification of this effect.

¹⁰ Of the 26 TLC3 couples who were married at baseline, ten feature children by a prior partner or partners. However, three of those couples participated in only the first or first and second wave of interviews and so are excluded from this discussion for lack of data. A fourth is excluded because they are separated at the baseline interview and divorce soon after, and so although they are technically married, they are neither cohabiting nor romantically involved at any point during our observation.

¹¹ However, both couples are clear that these are temporary separations, not the end of their relationships.

¹² Only 2% of mothers are estimated to live with stepchildren (Kreider, and Fields. 2005).