

**Differential outcomes among adolescent fathers:  
Understanding fatherhood as a transformative process**

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In response to the rising numbers of mother headed households, there is a great debate about whether to encourage young unwed parents to marry. Policies designed to pursue and/or punish fathers who do not meet their legal and financial responsibilities and to promote marriage, *carte blanche*, are referred to as “the marriage agenda.” This agenda is reactive to the social costs of single motherhood, which have included high rates of poverty and a heavy reliance on public programs for economic support (Carlson, McLanahan & England, 2001; Coley, 2001; Furstenberg, 1995).

From the perspective of the sociologist, young unwed fathers are important to understand because they are an important piece of the puzzle; biology dictates that fathers must play a critical role in the rise in mother headed households, but their role is difficult to track and clarify (Hijiwa, Wilson & Turkheimer, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. There is some evidence that the declining rate of marriage is linked to decreases in the proportion of “marriageable” men, defined as men who are able to fulfill their traditional role as primary provider. If this is the case, then the problem is primarily economic and the solution should focus on the providing greater opportunities to those segments of the population hardest hit by changes in economy (Wilson, 1987). Others have argued that the problem is linked to changing social values (including the demise of commitment and responsibility) and that we must promote the institution of marriage as the foundation upon which our culture is built (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1993).

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<sup>1</sup> More recently, several researchers have indicated that the rise in mother headed households does not necessarily mean that fathers are truly absent, deadbeat dads (Cabrera et al, 2000; Coley, 2001). Many unmarried fathers remain actively and positively involved in childrearing. Understanding the full spectrum of father-child relations is critical to an informed debate on the state of marriage and the wisdom of the marriage agenda.

From a psychological perspective, fathers are important because the quantity and quality of a father's engagement with his children has deep, enduring psychological consequences (Cabrera et al., 2000; Marsiglio et al., 2000). The psychological perspective focuses more squarely on the relationship that develops between father and mother and between father and child. There is good evidence that two parents are better than one (in most circumstances) because childrearing is a physically, psychologically, and financially demanding job (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1985; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato & Keith, 1991). Fathers who are positively engaged have a direct beneficial impact on child well-being in many of the same ways that mothers have a direct impact. They can also have indirect effects on child outcome by providing financial and emotional support to the child's mother (Lamb et al., 1987; Lamb, 1997).

But a father's impact on his partner and child depends on the nature of his involvement. Some men do not play a positive role in the lives of their children and while it might seem too radical to suggest that some fathers should do their children the favor of abandoning them, it is difficult to avoid the fact that in some situations a father's disengagement from childrearing may come as a relief. It is clearly the case that some mothers are able to make do without fathers, often relying on the support of extended family members (Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999; Coley, 2001).

The quality of a father's involvement may matter more his mere presence or absence, but it is important to note that fathers are not easily substituted by another secondary caregiver. The absent father can have a palpable psychological impact simply because he is absent. Too many children long for and resent their absent fathers. . Indeed, it was the experience of hearing my adolescent clients talk about their absent fathers that drew me to this topic at the beginning of my career as an academic. The point is that we need to have a fuller understanding of fathers if we

are to develop and promote clear, sensible policies on marriage. We know we have a problem, but we do not have a clear diagnosis. We are not even sure who the patient is.

### **Subgroups of fathers**

For practical reasons, fathers can be divided into four broad categories. First, there are men who seem well prepared for adulthood in all the usual ways and then make a reasonably successful adjustment to fatherhood. At the other extreme are the fathers who have troubled histories and few resources and make a poor adjustment to parenthood. These are the fathers who willfully disengage or are prevented from engaging with their children. It also includes the fathers who remain involved, but do more harm than good.

Then, there is a third group of fathers who appear to have the social and psychological potential to become good fathers, who we would label as “low risk,” but who end up disengaging from childrearing or engaging in behavior that is clearly unhealthy for their children. Understanding how these fathers are different from those who make a positive adjustment to parenthood is critical for prevention researchers, who are concerned with how to keep low risk fathers on a positive trajectory.

Finally, there is a fourth group of fathers who are of interest to intervention oriented psychologists. These are the young men who appear to be at high risk for failing to function adequately as fathers, but who surprisingly do much better than expected. This group of fathers is interesting like the cancer patient who lives despite the doctor’s prediction of certain death. They represent something wonderful and mysterious about will and spirit. They also seem to hold some hidden clue about how to work effectively with seemingly hopeless cases. If we can understand how they are different from their peers who look like bad bets and live up to that

expectation, then we may learn something important and useful about how some young men overcome their past difficulties and rise to challenge of parenthood.

Consider the case of Carl, who was one of these unexpected successes. Carl had a history of conduct disorder, substance abuse, and spent some time in jail shortly after the birth of his child. For obvious reasons did not seem like a good bet for a good outcome. Here is an excerpt from an interview we conducted with him two years after the birth of his first child.

Interviewer: So how do you think you're doing as a father?

Carl: I think I'm doing very good as a father.

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Carl: Because I'm working two jobs and I'm spending time with my kids and I'm constantly around them. Aint a time when I aint around them. When I wake up, they see my face, when they go to sleep, they see my face. So, as long as they see my face then and there, I'm alright. It's like they are a very special part of me and it's just something I can't live without.

Interviewer: How do you think Crystal's feelings about you have changed over the past year? Put yourself in her shoes as far as feelings towards you.

Carl: She probably grew really deeply in love with me. Just seeing that...what type a person I was...When I left (for jail) my son was like four months old, something like that. When I came back she probably didn't know if I was going to stay or if I was going to leave. That's a big issue, and being teenage parents...you don't really know if the father going to be there or not. Cause this...its like a statistic that most people underage who have kids or come from broken homes they don't really stay together. You see a lot of women out here, a lot of little girls getting pregnant and stuff like that, and their baby's daddy leave them and then they just stuck on public assistance and they don't have no help. And, I think that she really just respect me more, just seeing that I stuck there being with my kids.

Interviewer: How have you changed?

Carl: I mean, just I'm more mature now. You know, I am more settled. Like before I had my kids, you know, man I was living life. I was living my life, on my terms. Now, I learn to live life on life's terms, you know. You've got to deal with the reality of the situation. I have two kids, I just can't go and do what I want to do, go spend my money on all...you know, I used to just buy flashy clothes, and that was all I was thinking about. I didn't have responsibilities... I was just enjoying myself, doing whatever there is things to do, going out, going to shows,

partying, coming in three o'clock, four o'clock. I can't do that now, I got kids so I got to be there with them, and I've got to take some stress off her. So I got to be there all the time. I am more settled now, you know.

This paper focuses on fathers like Carl. Our primary goal was to identify some capacities and circumstances which facilitate these sorts of changes. I am going to take you there the long way because I believe the process through which we arrived at our understanding of these fathers is in itself informative. Our strategy included a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques, which allowed us to move from detecting general patterns in the adjustment to fatherhood to examining the particular circumstance of a few fathers who did not fit the pattern<sup>2</sup>.

### **Step One: Finding the fathers and measuring risk and outcome<sup>3</sup>**

Our wish to study young, high risk fathers presented us with several methodological problems. The first involved finding these fathers, recruiting them into a research study, and getting them to talk to us about their feelings, experiences, and relationships. Our primary recruitment strategy consisted of gaining access to expectant fathers through their pregnant partners. This meant that we recruited fathers through programs catering to pregnant teenagers,

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<sup>2</sup> Before I describe this study in greater detail, I would like add the caveat that the boundaries between these four groups are fuzzier than I have made them out to be. There are two important reasons for this fuzziness. First, many fathers function well in some respects and quite poorly in others, which makes them hard to categorize. Second, fathers may move back and forth between categories; they may look like poorly functioning fathers for some period of time and then look much better some time later. This sort of fuzziness is a source of irritation to researchers like me and I will deal with it in this paper by focusing on extremes.

such as special schools and prenatal clinics. We conducted this study in Chicago, spoke with about 350 young women about participating in the study, and successfully recruited 181 of their partners. The rate of recruitment suggests partial success; the drawback of this strategy is that we were not able to gain access to those young men who had already disengaged from their partners.

Beyond the challenge of identifying and recruiting these young expectant fathers into our study, we also wanted to differentiate between fathers. This goal required that we assess the risk status of young men prior to childbirth and then assess their functioning as fathers at some later point in time. We developed a multi method approach, zeroing in on fathers from several angles. We videotaped and coded their interactions with their partners, we interviewed them for several hours, asking about their relationship with their own parents, their relationship with their partner, their expectations of fatherhood, their psychological well being, their academic and vocational functioning, etc., etc. etc.. We also interviewed their partners, asking many of the same questions, hoping to obtain some corroborating evidence.

We followed up with these fathers two years after childbirth, videotaping and coding their interactions with their children, interviewing them about their parenting beliefs and practices, their experience of fatherhood, their relationship with their partners, and the amount and quality of time they spent with their children. Again, the partners of these fathers were interviewed and used as corroborators. The information we gathered was used to create an index of paternal functioning, which included positive indices such as the presence of nurturing behavior, and negative indices such as high rates of parenting stress, physically punitive parenting behavior, and low rates of patience, tolerance and empathy.

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<sup>3</sup> See Florsheim et al, 2003 and Moore and Florsheim, 2003 for details regarding the methods

## **Step Two: Identifying trends between risk and outcome**

Using the measures of risk and outcome we had selected, could we make predictions about who would become positively engaged in parenting and who would become negatively engaged? Our basic hypothesis was simple: Fathers who had a history of psychopathology, a history of poor relations with their own parents, and a conflict ridden relationship with their partner would exhibit more parental dysfunction, defined as paternal absence, hostile parenting behaviors, and attitudes associated with child abuse.

Generally our predictions were confirmed (see Florsheim et al., 2003; Moore & Florsheim, 2003). Our most robust finding was that troubled, hostile relations between fathers and their partners made for a more difficult adjustment to parenthood. Fathers who were identified as hostile (based on their interaction with their partners) were more likely (than warm fathers) to disengage from parenting. Those hostile fathers who remained involved as co parents were more likely to report dissatisfaction with their co-parenting relationship at follow up. Hostile fathers were also more likely to become violent with their partners, although it is important to note that most of the violence was reported as reciprocal. All these relationship problems were linked to higher rates of parenting stress, lower rates of positive parenting behavior, and higher risk for child abuse.

These findings are generally consistent with the research literature on adult married couples, indicating that there is a strong link between the quality of a couple's relationship and the quality of their parenting behavior (Belsky, 1984; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Cox et al, 1999; Katz & Gottman, 1996). However, it is important to note that in our study, many couples were not married, not living together, and/or no longer romantically involved at follow up. Whether the couple remained together romantically did not emerge as an important predictor of parental

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used to assess risk and outcome.



functioning. There were a number of fathers who were able to maintain a positive connection with their partners, despite the fact that they were no longer romantically involved.

We identified two other salient predictors of paternal functioning. First, we found that young men who reported poor relations with their own parents during the prenatal interview, had higher child abuse potential scores at follow up. Second, we found that young men who had a history of psychopathology (assessed during the prenatal interview) reported higher rates of physically punitive behavior toward their child at follow up (Fowles & Florsheim, 2003). Related to this finding, couples in which both partners had a history of psychopathology were more likely to become violent with one another (Moore & Florsheim, 2003)

### **Step Three: Identifying fathers who buck the trend**

Subsequent to identifying trends in the trajectories of young fathers, we wanted to identify exceptions to these trends, with a particular focus on the unexpected successes, the fathers who did better than we expected based on our assessment of their initial risk status. As I indicated a few moments ago, this step is important because, as clinicians, we need to move beyond the identification of developmental trends and stable differences between high and low risk individuals. Knowing more about individuals who buck the trends may reveal something useful about how to facilitate positive development in our highest risk populations.

Based on the information collected from the entire sample of young expectant fathers, we identified a group of young men who were, by most standards, at very high risk for paternal failure. This group of 60 was drawn from the larger sample of 179, and was defined as having at least two of the following risk factors: a history of psychopathology, poor relations with their own parents, school or vocational failure, legal problems often related to drugs and drug trafficking, and previous children born to other women. Among these fathers, we identified 18

who, at follow up, were doing better than expected. They were not perfect fathers, but they were functioning well in most respects.

We found that it was difficult to understand the differences between these two groups of fathers if we paid too much attention to their good intentions during the partner's pregnancy. Most fathers start with good intentions. These young men did not see themselves as more or less invested in fatherhood than their peers. There were also no clear differences in the types of individual risks we identified in the better than expected group<sup>4</sup>. In other words, it did not seem to matter whether a father had psychopathology and poor relations versus school failure and another child born to another women. Our failure to understand the "better than expected" fathers using standard methods of analysis suggested that we dig a little deeper into the individual stories of the highest risk fathers. From this group of 18, we selected two who I will describe in some detail.

#### **Step four: Qualitative Follow up**

##### **Darnel and Sherrie**

Darnel was 18 and Sherrie was 16 when they were recruited into our study. Like all the high risk fathers, Darnel had a troubled past. He had been expelled from school for fighting and skipping classes and was not working when we first spoke with him. He seemed nonplussed by

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<sup>4</sup> Previous research on individuals who make a positive adjustment to adulthood despite difficult juvenile histories has indicated that a positive relationship with a supportive partner often provided a stabilizing influence (Rutter, Quinton & Hill, 1990). We therefore considered that perhaps the partners of these better than expected fathers were more interpersonally skilled and somehow facilitated the transformation we observed. However, we could not detect clear differences between the partners of the better than expected father and their high risk peers. We also examined whether the "better than expected" fathers were more likely than their high risk peers to be working at follow up. No difference was detected.

the pending challenge of parenthood, saying that Sherrie's pregnancy has not really affected him but he was looking forward to "hanging out" with his kid.

Darnel reported a generally positive relationship with his mother, but his father had been only peripherally involved in his life and died a year before our first interview. Darnel had troubled memories of his father, who had beat him as a child. He had abandoned the family, but on his deathbed wished for some reconciliation with his children. Darnell did not talk easily about his father and indicated that his feelings about their relationship and his death were something he did not want share with others, not even Sherrie.

Despite these risks, Darnel reported a positive relationship with Sherrie, which was corroborated by our own observations and was generally supported by Sherrie's account. He also seemed determined to become a good father, differentiating himself from his own father.

At follow up, two years after their son (Theo) was born, Darnell and Sherrie were no longer romantically involved. When asked why they broke up, Darnell told the interviewer that after his son's birth, he was caught for drug trafficking and went to jail for three months. This time he spent away from Sherrie and his child changed the way Sherrie felt about him. Darnell explains it like this:

We grew apart. The time I spent in jail, we just grew apart. I still care for her, I still love her the same, but that time that was missed can't be replaced.

Nonetheless, Darnell was actively, positively involved in co parenting, and received high scores across our measures of parental functioning. He was working full time in a legitimate job, providing financial support, and frequently visiting his son. Sherrie summarized Darnell's fathering in the following way:

I think he's a good father because he definitely spends time with his son. I can give him that; that's an A+. Another reason is when he's not around, he does call to see how Theo is doing. He calls to check on him like a good parent would do.

Then when they're together you can tell that's father and son because they really get along well.

It is interesting to note that despite the fact that Darnell was functioning well as a father and seemed to be deeply invested in his son, there was some uncertainty looming in the background. When we asked him to rate his opportunities for success, he said he had a 50-50 chance of making it, citing the temptation of drug money and doubts about his ability to apply himself as potential obstacles to his continued success.

### **Robert and Latoya**

Robert was 19 at the time of our initial interview and his girlfriend Latoya was 16 and four months pregnant. Robert had a history of depression, was involved in a gang, and had a previous child born to another woman. He also reported a distant, conflicted relationship with his own father, who “comes around every once in a while.” On the positive side, Robert was still in school and was in contact with this first child and in a generally positive (and platonic) co-parenting relationship with the child’s mothers

Robert described an argumentative relationship with Latoya, and said they sometimes became physically aggressive. Most of the arguments focused on Latoya wanting him to be around more and his wish to maintain his independence. Related to this, Robert had wanted Latoya to have an abortion, but she and her family didn’t believe that was right.

At the two year follow up, Robert and Latoya were living together and had three children. Shortly after their son was born, Latoya became pregnant with twins. Somewhat surprisingly, Robert and Latoya were arguing less, were no longer physically aggressive, and seemed noticeably warmer with one another. When asked about changes in their relationship, Robert responded as follows:

Robert: I wasn't expecting for the relationship to be this long. I thought when we

first started out we was just going to be, you know, going together for a little while. But it ended up being a year, and then after a year it ended up being two years, and then the baby came, and then the other two came, and we just, we grew closer. I try my best to do anything for her. I clean for her if she's gone. I cook for her if she's hungry and don't feel like cooking. I wash for her if she don't feel like washing. I practically do anything for her, anything I feel will make her happy. And she knows I care about her a lot.

Interviewer: Ok. How does she know that?

Robert: I tell her. I always tell her.

Robert was not a perfect father. During our videotaped play activity he was sometimes too controlling with his son. In his interview, he indicated that he used spanking as a form of discipline and felt this was necessary for children to understand the difference between right and wrong. On the other hand, despite his beliefs about discipline, we observed that he was generally warm with his son, and Lotoya's comments supported this impression. When we asked Robert to describe an ideal father, this is what he said:

An ideal father should be ... if they don't have the money to take care of their child that shouldn't make them turn away. Because money is not everything for that child. That child is going to need you more than what the money is going to be used for. I mean without your love and support for that child – if you just walk away cause you say “oh, I don't have enough money for this I can't provide for her so I'll just leave” - that child is going to hurt as it grows up wondering where you are, or where you been. Basically I think you should be around that child simply because it's yours. And you don't need money to take care of a child. Ok, you need money in a materialistic way, but mentally, physically, emotionally - you just be there for your child.

### **Recurring themes:**

In sorting through the stories of these unexpected successes, we identified two broad, overarching themes that seemed to set them apart from their peers. First, we observed that among several of the young men in our study, fatherhood itself seemed to provide a catalyst for change, a sort of wake up call. These better than expected fathers utilized their resources and developed their strengths in response to the challenge of parenthood. For some fathers this wake-up call did not occur until sometime after the child was born. For example, several fathers went to jail

during the first year of their child's life and it was the experience of being in jail and away from their child that seemed to mobilize their wish to make a change. Here is an excerpt from our interview with Darnell

Interviewer: Can you tell me how things are different for you from the last time you were interviewed?

Darnell: You know I am no longer... me and Sherrie are no longer together. Financially I am doing better now, and I got a better look on life this time.

Interviewer: How so, how is your outlook different?

Darnell: At first I wasn't really too much concerned and I was just letting things go. Then I see that I got to step up and make things happen. That's basically how I changed. Having a baby has made me more responsible. At first I really didn't have no responsibilities, I just did what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it. But now since I have my son, it's my responsibility to make sure his priorities come first, what he need. I have to work and be able to be there when Sherrie call me and he need something, I got to have the money for what he need, so... he basically made me more responsible and I think he just brightened up my life. There is something about being around him that makes me happy.

Interviewer: What do you think brought about that change?

Darnell: Well, I let things happen for too long and I got into the wrong situation, doing time in jail. Then I got out and knew I had to change and made the change. What really made me change was that when they took me to jail I couldn't spend no time with my son. That was what really made me change, the fact that I didn't want to go back. If I make more mistakes then my son is the one who would suffer.

In a very similar vein, here is an excerpt from Robert's interview.

Robert: I use to be on the streets for awhile, and all that, but when he came I slowed it down. I wasn't as wild, as bad as I use to be.

Interviewer: Ok. What kinds of things were wild, what were you doing that was wild.

Robert: : Gang banging and all that stuff. I didn't care too much about anything. I didn't really have too much responsibility. I had a daughter at the time, but it wasn't you know, I wasn't too serious about kids until Johhny came. Then I just stopped. I realized I got two kids now it's time to slow it down with all the wild acting and stuff.

Interviewer: Ok. So now you're different in what way? Like what are you doing now that is different?

Robert: I act more mature. I'm aggressive with everything I do that's positive.

Responsibility and maturity are clear themes throughout the interviews with the better than expected fathers, who seem to have developed a strong identification with their role as father, putting the needs of their children first and foremost. This investment in fatherhood implies a capacity to appreciate, at a deep level, what a child needs from a father. Such an investment was not observed in the high risk young men who made a poor adjustment to fatherhood. Many of them seemed too tightly focused on their own concerns or too defeated by hardship to make a significant commitment to their child.

Responsibility and maturity are elusive, ambiguous psychological constructs that are difficult to define and measure, and nearly impossible to induce in 18 year old men who never had these characteristics. While it is fascinating to know that these kinds of changes can occur, it is a little discouraging that we don't know how to foster the development of responsibility or maturity. Indeed, several programs for young fathers have been developed around the theme of male responsibility (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). None have had much success. I am certainly not suggesting that we put young fathers in jail with the hope the experience has a maturing effect.

However, a second theme emerged in the stories of several "better than expected" fathers that seems more accessible to intervention. Among these better than expected fathers, the relationship between partners not only remained positive, but in many cases improved over time. This small group of fathers seemed to develop what John Gottman (1999), a marital researcher at the University of Washington, refers to as *wenness* (for lack of a better term?). The couples that Gottman identified as struggling with the challenge of marriage as a team, and who found some

shared sense of glory in their efforts, tended to have positive enduring relationships. Many of the high risk fathers spoke about themselves, their partners, and their children as distinct entities, living in separate worlds, pursuing their own agendas. The “better than expected” fathers and their partners expressed a more generous and generative perspective on their relationship. In the young men, this came across as an eagerness to be with their child, to support their partner, to participate in something that seemed greater than themselves. The partners of the “better than expected” fathers were expressed appreciation for the commitment. This stood in sharp contrast to the partners of the poorly functioning fathers, who often complained quite bitterly about their partner’s selfishness. Although financial support was an issue for many, most mothers were more keenly focused on the fathers efforts to provide consistent emotional support. When we asked Sherrie to describe how Darnell had changed since the previous interview, she said the following:

He's changed, he's really stable with the job that he has. Then he was kind of shifting in and out of this job, that job, this job, that job. He's pretty stable with this one I guess, he's matured, and he's really serious about what needs to be done right now...He's thoughtful, he's there when I need him, and if he doesn't have it he will get it.

Let me pause here and remind you that this is a couple that is no longer romantically involved.

He's just perfect, he's a perfect guy He's considerate about my feelings, like if I'm not feeling so good, or feeling down. He will come and try to spend some time with Theo and come and try to talk to me. If he can't come here, we'll talk on the phone. Things like that. He's there for me when I need him for something for Theo and for me. When he lends me a hand, he'll give it to me, he won't let me borrow it. He'll give it to me. He'll say, here you can have this. And when Theo needs something (clicks fingers), I got it.

Lotoya was less articulate about the changes in her relationship with Robert than Sherrie was about Darnell, but the change is apparent when we compare her responses at the prenatal



interview and the follow up interview. At the first interview when we asked her how she felt about Robert, she said

I love him --That is about it. He treats me better than other people that I have been with. And we spend more time. He gets along with the family good.

At the follow-up there is subtle shift how Latoya describes Robert. This interview took place not long after Latoya had given birth to twins after a difficult and complicated pregnancy that required her to be on bedrest.

Interviewer: How do you feel about him?

Latoya: I feel he's a good father. I love him. He's a good person. He takes care of me, he took care of me when I was sick. He takes care of me now. He had the kids all the time. He did, I mean everything, everything (chuckle) I didn't have to do anything. He quit his job to take care of me.

Interviewer: Ok. You said he's a good father too. Tell me about that.

Latoya: He takes care of the kids, I mean like he washes their clothes, put their clothes on. Takes them places. Gives them what they need. Things they want. Spends time with them, that's about it.

## **Conclusion**

In our effort to predict a positive adjustment to parenthood among these young unwed fathers, we considered several possible factors. A relatively clear message emerged from our data: no matter what our analytic strategy, fathers who were able to establish a stable and emotionally secure relationship with their partners were able to become positively engaged with their children despite histories marked by disadvantage, failure, trauma, and misbehavior. For some couples, a positive relationship was apparent in the beginning and the challenge was maintaining its quality across the developmentally challenging moment. For others, the trick was to create a positive relationship with little material to work with. In these cases, it seemed that

the psychological impact of a newborn baby allowed for the development of a new strengths or the discovery of new resources. This process may seem mysterious and we admit that we do not understand why this transformation happens for some and not others. But we are now several steps closer to finding that out. At this point, we know enough to develop relationship focused treatment programs for young couples. Understanding when and how these programs work will bring us closer to solving this mystery.

An important lesson to be learned from these unexpected successes is that transformations are possible and that relationship factors play a primary role in the transformation process. As most parents will attest, sustaining romance and raising children are difficult endeavors. It may be the case that marriage lends some stability to what seems like a naturally unstable process, but it is also the case that marriage does not guarantee love, respect, acceptance, or this “weness” that Gottman has identified. From a public policy perspective, the institution of marriage is a more convenient target than the quality of couples’ relationships. However, without a focus on relationship quality it seems unlikely that the marriage agenda will produce the desired effects. Couples who stay together may still be at risk for serious co-parenting and parenting problems. Couples who break up, like Darnell and Sherrie, may still be able to function quite well as coparents. These facts make it difficult to know whether or when we should encourage couples to get married, or even stay together as a couple. Perhaps it is a safer bet to promote relationships through the development and implementation of couple focused interventions and let marriage happen when it happens.

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