Fathers’ Perceptions of Maternal Gatekeeping and Relationship Functioning: The
Mediating Roles of Coparenting Closeness and Support

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Anna Lorraine Olsavsky, B.S.
Graduate Program in Human Development and Family Science

The Ohio State University

2017

Thesis Committee:
Sarah J. Schoppe-Sullivan, Advisor
Jen Wong
Abstract

This study examined the associations between fathers’ perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behaviors and later perceptions of couple relationship functioning as mediated through coparenting closeness and support. Maternal gatekeeping behaviors and coparenting closeness and support were reported by 182 fathers at three months postpartum, and two aspects of couple relationship functioning—specifically dyadic adjustment and negative interaction—were reported on at nine months postpartum. Results indicated that in most models tested, there was a significant indirect effect illustrating that fathers’ perceptions of coparenting closeness and support played a mediating role between fathers’ perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behaviors and fathers’ perceptions of couple relationship functioning. These models followed two typical patterns: greater perceived gate opening behaviors were associated with higher levels of dyadic adjustment or lower levels of negative interaction through higher levels of coparenting closeness or support. Additionally, greater perceived gate closing behaviors were associated with lower levels of dyadic adjustment or higher levels of negative interaction through lower levels of coparenting closeness or support. This study highlights the importance of studying individuals in the context of their family system and how differing subsystems of the family are interrelated.
Dedication

Dedicated to Mom, Dad, Kara, and Jesse
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank my advisor, Dr. Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, who made this thesis possible through her tireless dedication to not only me, but all of her students. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Jen Wong for her assistance and encouragement throughout the process of creating this thesis. Both Sarah and Jen show a level of support for students that is above and beyond expectations. I would also like to thank other faculty and students within the Human Development and Family Science program who have aided this thesis along the way through practical advice or encouragement: Dr. Claire Kamp Dush, Dr. Kelly Purtell, Lauren Altenburger, Miranda Berrigan, Julia Yan, Jin-Kyung Lee, Rachel Garcia, Jill Yavorsky, Rachel Arocho, and Sugene Cho. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their support through this process.
Vita
May 2011.................................................................Avondale High School
2015.......B.S. Human Development and Family Studies, Central Michigan University
2015 to present..........................................................The Ohio State University

Publications

relationships to engage fathers: Helping mothers to open the gate and stand back.


Field of Study

Major Field: Human Development and Family Science
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. ii

Dedication ........................................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgments .............................................................................................................................. iv

Vita ......................................................................................................................................................... v

List of Figures ....................................................................................................................................... viii

Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2: Method ................................................................................................................................. 9

Chapter 3: Results ................................................................................................................................. 14

Chapter 4: Discussion ........................................................................................................................... 20

References ............................................................................................................................................ 25

Appendix A. Tables and Figures ........................................................................................................... 30
List of Tables

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations...................................................... 31
List of Figures

Figure 1: Conceptual Model 32
Chapter 1: Introduction

The transition to parenthood is an exciting, yet tumultuous time in the family. With this transition come changes in roles and family functioning. One prominent change in families is the emergence of the coparenting relationship. Coparenting has been defined as the relationship two or more caregivers hold in relation to a child in which they are invested (Feinberg, 2003). In addition to the emergence of the coparenting relationship, the addition of a child brings about changes and potential stressors to the couple’s romantic relationship as well. Although couples experiencing the transition to parenthood are less likely to divorce than before becoming parents, the average couple experiences declines in relationship satisfaction (Kluwer, 2010; Waite & Lillard, 1991). Given that the quality of the couple relationship and the coparenting relationship have both been linked to child outcomes (Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010), it is important to understand not only what changes over the transition to parenthood, but also what mechanisms are involved in how those changes occur.

The current study aimed to examine what relationship processes may be at play in the declines in couple relationship functioning over the transition to parenthood. In particular, this paper focused on how elements of the coparenting relationship—specifically maternal gatekeeping (e.g., gate opening, gate closing) and coparenting supportiveness and closeness—may be associated with couple relationship functioning—
specifically dyadic adjustment and negative interaction—over the transition to parenthood. This study used data from The New Parents project, which was a longitudinal study of dual-earner, first-time, different-sex parents who experienced the transition to parenthood in 2008-2009.

Although there is previous work that has examined the interplay of the couple relationship and coparenting relationship (Holland & McElwain, 2013; Schoppe-Sullivan, Altenburger, Lee, Bower, & Kamp Dush, 2015; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004), this study is unique in that it connects maternal gatekeeping and the couple relationship from the perspectives of fathers. Moreover, this study goes beyond simply identifying the association between maternal gatekeeping and couple relationship functioning by also testing other aspects of the coparenting relationship as potential mechanisms for these associations.

**Family Systems Theory: The Coparenting and Couple Subsystems**

Family systems theory postulates that in order to understand the individual, one must place that individual in the context of his or her relationships (Cox & Paley, 1997). According to family systems theory, families are more than simply the sum of their parts; instead, families are viewed as systems made up of subsystems. These subsystems are interdependent and can include the marital subsystem, the parent-child subsystem, the sibling subsystem, and the coparenting subsystem. To best understand families, it is important to go beyond questions on an individual level and study the relationships that exist in the subsystem level of the family system. The executive subsystem of the family is the coparenting relationship (Minuchin, 1974). The coparenting relationship is the
relationship that two or more caregivers hold in relation to a child in which they have a shared vested interest (Feinberg, 2003). Although related, the coparenting subsystem is distinct from the couple relationship subsystem as it pertains specifically to the shared parenting role and does not include the romantic relationship held between those caregivers (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004).

Family systems research has examined the association between the couple relationship (typically in the form of marital quality) and dimensions of coparenting. This work usually places marital quality as the preceding or predictive variable and coparenting or general parenting practices as the outcome variable (Morrill, 2010). Typically, higher reports of marital quality are associated with higher ratings of supportive or positive dimensions of coparenting (Bouchard, 2014; Christopher, Umemura, Mann, Jacobvitz, & Hazen, 2015: Morrill, 2010). For example, one study found that as marital quality declined over the transition to parenthood, fathers engaged in more competitive coparenting and were less involved in parenting and mothers were less supportive in their coparenting relationship (Christopher et al., 2015). Studies have also found that various dimensions of coparenting (e.g., alliance, cooperation, conflict) can mediate or moderate the association between marital quality and parenting outcomes (Camisasca, Miragoli, & Blasio, 2014; Pedro, Ribeiro, & Shelton, 2012). Other work has found support for bidirectional associations between coparenting quality and marital quality (Le, McDaniel, Leavitt, & Feinberg, 2016; Morrill, 2010; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004), lending support to studying the predictive roles of both types of relationships. Despite the prevalence of work into the associations between coparenting and the couple
relationship, none have specifically examined the role of maternal gatekeeping, a dimension of the coparenting relationship, in these associations.

The emergence of the coparenting relationship and its distinction from the couple relationship comes at the transition to parenthood. At the transition to parenthood, the couple relationship is particularly vulnerable; the average couple experiences declines in relationship satisfaction and increases in marital conflict (Kluwer, 2010). In line with a family systems perspective, it is important to understand these declines in light of the fact that the quality of the couple relationship, as well as that of the new coparenting relationship, are linked to child developmental outcomes (Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015; Kluwer, 2010; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Although previous work has tested couple relationship indicators and individual characteristics of parents as potential causal factors in these changes (Kluwer, 2010), fewer studies have examined how the coparenting relationship may be predictive of marital change over the transition to parenthood and further down the line. One study found that coparenting relationship quality at 6 months postpartum was predictive of marital quality at 3 years, but the reverse was not true (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). This finding lends rationale to studying the associations between coparenting and the couple relationship with coparenting dimensions used as predictors.

**Maternal Gatekeeping**

The coparenting relationship is made up of supporting and undermining behaviors, childrearing agreement, and the division of parental duties (Feinberg, 2002). This study focused on maternal gatekeeping, which falls under the umbrella of
undermining and supportive behaviors. Maternal gatekeeping was originally understood as beliefs and behaviors that inhibit father involvement (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). The original conceptualization of maternal gatekeeping included three main dimensions of behaviors or beliefs mothers exhibited because of their resistance to letting go of certain domains of family responsibilities. The first of these domains involves setting standards; for example, this would include mothers managing the standard for how things should be done in the home and only allowing fathers to be helpers (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). The second dimension involves validating the maternal identity as the main caregiver and home manager. The third dimension involves differentiated family roles, where mothers and fathers have distinct and different roles in the family, with mothers’ roles falling into the nurturing and home management domain (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). More recently, identity theory has been applied to the theory of maternal gatekeeping, providing an avenue through which maternal gatekeeping beliefs and behaviors are perpetuated; specifically, male and female gendered identities create expectations about family roles, and contribute to the emergence and continuation of maternal gatekeeping behaviors (Adamsons, 2010).

Moving forward, the conceptualization of maternal gatekeeping has grown to include behaviors that can also facilitate father involvement (Puhlman & Pasley, 2013). Puhlman and Pasley proposed three dimensions for maternal gatekeeping: control, encouragement, and discouragement (2013). Maternal gatekeeping behaviors can now be understood as those exhibited by mothers that can either facilitate or inhibit father involvement (Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008).
Maternal gatekeeping behaviors that facilitate father involvement are called gate opening behaviors, whereas behaviors that inhibit father involvement are called gate closing behaviors (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Gate closing behaviors are typically viewed as detrimental to the coparenting relationship as fathers are less likely to be involved and more likely to feel detached from their coparenting role (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Gate opening behaviors are viewed in a somewhat mixed way. Some work has found that gate opening behaviors do result in increased father involvement, and are therefore good for the coparenting relationship, as well as the child (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Other work has found mothers’ gate opening behaviors to be detrimental as they may be perceived by fathers as demanding or nagging them to increase their involvement in childrearing (Fagan & Cherson, 2015). None of these studies took the next step to link gate opening and gate closing behaviors to the functioning of the couple relationship.

This study focuses on the views of fathers on family relationships over the transition to parenthood. This decision was made because fathers are typically the object of maternal gatekeeping behaviors; therefore, their experiences with maternal gatekeeping are more likely to affect other areas of their coparenting and even couple relationship experiences. Additionally, some work has already been done on the association between maternal gate closing and mothers’ relationship perceptions; specifically, when mothers feel less sure about the future of their relationship, they are more likely to exhibit gate closing behaviors (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015).

**The Present Study**
The present study aimed to add to the existing literature on the couple relationship and the coparenting relationship and their association over the transition to parenthood. Specifically, this study sought to be the first to connect fathers’ perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behaviors with fathers’ later ratings of couple relationship functioning using coparenting closeness and support as potential mediating variables. These variables were selected as potential mediators because both constructs have some overlapping similarities to gatekeeping and couple relationship measures. Coparenting support, in some ways, is similar to gate opening behaviors, because it can involve a level of encouragement, but distinct in that support can occur outside of encouragement, and perceptions of encouragement may lead to greater feelings of coparenting support overall. Coparenting closeness is logically a step between maternal gatekeeping and the couple relationship in that it measures how aspects of the coparenting relationship have enhanced or improved the couple relationship. This study predicted that the association between fathers’ perceptions of maternal gatekeeping and their later perceptions of relationship functioning would be associated through the coparenting relationship. An illustration of the conceptual framework for this study is shown in Figure 1. The main hypotheses were:

1. Maternal gate opening behaviors as reported by fathers at three months postpartum will exert an indirect effect on relationship satisfaction and negative interaction at nine months postpartum through coparenting closeness at three months postpartum.
2. Maternal gate closing behaviors as reported by fathers at three months postpartum will exert an indirect effect on relationship satisfaction and negative interaction at nine months postpartum through coparenting closeness at three months postpartum.

3. Maternal gate opening behaviors as reported by fathers at three months postpartum will exert an indirect effect on relationship satisfaction and negative interaction at nine months postpartum through coparenting support at three months postpartum.

4. Maternal gate closing behaviors as reported by fathers at three months postpartum will exert an indirect effect on relationship satisfaction and negative interaction at nine months postpartum through coparenting support at three months postpartum.
Chapter 2: Method

Participants

This study used data drawn from The New Parents Project, which is a longitudinal study of 182 different-sex, dual-earner couples who were expecting their first biological child in 2008-2009. For inclusion in the study, couples had to at least be cohabiting at the time of the study; 86% of the couples were married and 14% were cohabiting. Both partners had to be working full time prior to the birth of the child with plans to return to work at least part time after the birth of the child.

In order to participate, both partners had to be fluent in English and be at least 18 years of age. For fathers, ages ranged from 18 to 50 with a mean age of 30.20 (SD = 4.81). For mothers, ages ranged from 18 to 42 with a mean age of 28.24 (SD = 4.02). Because one of the aims of the study was to examine how dual-earner couples navigate the transition to parenthood, families had a relatively high income. The median annual family income was $81,000. Most participants identified as white; 85% of mothers and fathers identified as White/European American, 6% of mothers and 7% of fathers identified as Black/African American, 3% of mothers and 4% of fathers identified as Asian American or Pacific Islander, 2% of mothers and 3% of fathers identified as a race/ethnicity other than those listed, 4% of mothers and 1% of fathers identified amixed
race, and 4% of mothers and 2% of fathers identified as Hispanic/Latin American. No mothers reported any physical disabilities in their infants.

Given that this study focused on the experiences of fathers, only father data were used in analyses. Additionally, listwise deletion was used to account for missing data. This resulted in 140 fathers used for analyses and shifted the demographics of this sample slightly. Age of fathers ranged from 20 to 48 with a mean age of 30.22 (SD = 4.22). A slightly higher percentage of fathers were married in this sample with 89% married and 11% cohabiting. The sample also identified as White at a slightly higher rate than in the original sample with 88% of fathers identifying as White.

**Procedure**

The New Parents Project had four waves of data collection over the transition to parenthood. The first wave was collected during the third trimester of pregnancy. The second, third, and fourth waves of data were collected at three, six, and nine months postpartum, respectively. All time points included collection of survey and time use data, with waves one, two, and four also including observational data. The third wave of data at six months postpartum had low response rates, likely because of participant fatigue, and therefore was not used in this study. Given that the aim of this study was to examine the coparenting relationship and maternal gatekeeping behaviors, most data used were from the three and nine month postpartum waves. However, some control variables were only collected during the first wave in the third trimester of pregnancy, so those were also used in analyses.

**Measures**
**Maternal Gatekeeping.** Maternal gatekeeping was measured at three months postpartum using two subscales from The Parental Regulation Inventory (Van Egeren, 2000): maternal gate opening and maternal gate closing. Both mothers and fathers completed this survey in the form modified to be appropriate for their role as either a mother or a father. However, for the purposes of this study, fathers’ reports were used to measure maternal gatekeeping behaviors. This decision was made because fathers’ perceptions of mothers’ behaviors are likely more important to fathers’ relationship perceptions than mothers’ perceptions of their own behaviors.

Fathers were asked how often their baby’s mother exhibited certain gate opening or gate closing behaviors. Maternal gate opening and maternal gate closing subscales are made up of nine items each (see Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). Questions pertained to how often certain behaviors were exhibited by the mother and were rated on a scale of 1 (never) to 6 (several times a day). Maternal gate closing questions included items such as “how often does your baby’s mother tell you the right way to handle the situation,” or “how often does your baby’s mother criticize you.” Maternal gate opening questions included items such as “how often does your baby’s mother invite you to help,” or “how often does your baby’s mother tell other people what a good parent you are at a time when you can hear her.” Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach’s alpha. The internal consistency for gate opening behaviors was $\alpha = .87$ and for gate closing was $\alpha = .88$.

**Coparenting Closeness and Support.** Coparenting closeness and support were measured at three months postpartum using fathers’ reports on two subscales of the
Coparenting Relationship Scale (Feinberg, Brown, & Kan, 2012). Both subscales were rated from 0 (*not true of us*) to 6 (*very true of us*). The coparenting closeness subscale has five items and measures how much the coparenting relationship enhanced or strengthened the couple relationship. An example item is “We are growing and maturing together through experiences as parents.” The internal consistency for coparenting closeness was $\alpha = .82$. The coparenting support subscale has five items and measures perceived coparenting support from one’s partner. An example item is, “My baby’s father/mother makes me feel like I’m the best possible parent for our baby.” The internal consistency for coparenting support was $\alpha = .85$.

**Fathers’ Perceptions of Dyadic Adjustment.** Fathers’ perceptions of dyadic adjustment were measured at nine months postpartum using The Brief Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Sabourin, Valois, & Lussier, 2005). The Brief Dyadic Adjustment Scale has four items that ask about the general health of the romantic relationship. Three items ask about thoughts and behaviors (e.g., “do you confide in your mate?”) and are rated from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*all the time*). The final question asks about the respondent’s overall happiness and satisfaction in the relationship, and is rated from 0 (*extremely unhappy*) to 6 (*perfect*). The internal consistency for dyadic adjustment was .78.

**Fathers’ Perceptions of Relationship Conflict.** Fathers’ perceptions of relationship conflict were assessed at nine months postpartum using The Negative Interaction Scale (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). The Negative Interaction Scale has four items that ask about frequency of conflict; for example, one item is “my spouse/partner seems to view my words or actions more negatively than I mean them to
be.” The participant responds with one of three options: *never or almost never, once in a while, or frequently*. The internal consistency for negative interaction was .70.
Chapter 3: Results

Analysis Plan

Preliminary analyses were conducted to elucidate potential differences because of attrition and group characteristics. These analyses included ANOVA tests and Pearson correlations. Then, to test hypotheses, model 4 in the SPSS PROCESS Macro was used (Hayes, 2013) for mediation models. To evaluate significance, 10,000 sample bootstrap estimation was used to create 95% confidence intervals. Missing data were handled using listwise deletion for the mediation models.

Preliminary Analyses

Missing data were handled using listwise deletion. This meant the deletion of 42 fathers who had some or most data missing on the key study variables, leaving 140 fathers in analyses (77% of sample). To test for potential differences on demographic characteristics between those included and those deleted, a series of ANOVA tests was conducted testing for differences by income, age, education, race, and marital status. Income, age, and level of education did not significantly predict any differences between groups. Marital status, however, was significantly different between those included in analyses and those deleted, \( F(1,179) = 6.88, p < .01 \), such that those who were cohabiting instead of married were significantly more likely to be deleted. Additionally, race was
significantly different between those included and excluded, $F(1,176) = 3.90, p < .05$, such that those included were significantly more likely to be white.

Within the sample used in the current study, marital status predicted group differences for many variables. Fathers’ reports on dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum $F (1, 149) = 6.39, p < .05$, gate closing at three months postpartum $F (1, 168) = 10.60, p < .01$, coparenting support at three months postpartum $F (1, 163) = 7.13, p < .05$, and coparenting closeness at three months postpartum $F (1, 163) = 5.17, p < .05$ were all significantly associated with marital status such that those who were married reported higher dyadic adjustment, lower gate closing, higher coparenting support, and higher coparenting closeness. Therefore, marital status, as reported by fathers during the third trimester of pregnancy, was kept as a covariate in the analyses.

Correlational tests were also conducted among the key study variables within the sample of 140 fathers. Intercorrelations ranged from .04 to .76 (absolute value). The means, standard deviations, and correlations are shown in Table 1. The sample was relatively low on gate closing at three months postpartum ($M = 2.17, SD = .78$) and negative interaction at nine months postpartum ($M = 1.61, SD = .43$), relatively high on coparenting closeness at three months postpartum ($M = 5.09, SD = .58$), coparenting support at three months postpartum ($M = 4.96, SD = .92$), and dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum ($M = 5.20, SD = .58$), and somewhere in the middle on reports of gate opening at three months postpartum ($M = 3.86, SD = .91$).

Mediation Model Testing
A series of eight models was tested to examine the potential mediating role of coparenting closeness and support at three months postpartum in the associations between gate opening or gate closing behaviors at three months postpartum and dyadic adjustment or negative interaction at nine months postpartum. For all models, a measure of gatekeeping at three months postpartum was entered as the independent variable, a measure of relationship functioning at nine months postpartum was entered as the dependent variable, a measure of coparenting support or closeness at three months postpartum was entered as a mediating variable, and marital status was included as a control. Significance was evaluated using a 10,000 sample bootstrap estimation for a 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect \((ab)\) instead of p-values, as suggested by Hayes (2013).

**Coparenting Closeness as a Mediator.** Four models were tested using coparenting closeness as a mediator. Model one included reports of gate opening at three months postpartum and dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum. Fathers who reported higher levels of gate opening also experienced higher levels of coparenting closeness \((a = .53)\). Fathers who reported higher levels of coparenting closeness, in turn, experienced higher levels of dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum \((b = .26)\). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect \((ab = .14)\) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero \((95\% CI = [.07 .23])\) indicating a significant indirect effect.

Model two included reports of gate opening at three months postpartum and negative interaction at nine months postpartum. Fathers who reported higher levels of
gate opening also experienced higher levels of coparenting closeness \((a = .53)\). Fathers who reported higher levels of coparenting closeness, in turn, experienced lower levels of negative interaction at nine months postpartum \((b = -.12)\). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect \((ab = -.06)\) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely below zero \((95\% \text{ CI} = [-.13, -.01])\) indicating a significant indirect effect.

Model three included reports of gate closing at three months postpartum and dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum. Fathers who reported lower levels of gate closing also experienced higher levels of coparenting closeness \((a = -.50)\). Fathers who reported higher levels of coparenting closeness, in turn, experienced higher levels of dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum \((b = .17)\). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect \((ab = -.09)\) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely below zero \((95\% \text{ CI} = [-.17, -.02])\) indicating a significant indirect effect.

Model four included reports of gate closing at three months postpartum and negative interaction at nine months postpartum. Fathers who reported lower levels of gate closing also experienced higher levels of coparenting closeness \((a = -.50)\). Fathers who reported higher levels of coparenting closeness, in turn, experienced lower levels of negative interaction at nine months postpartum \((b = -.04)\). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect \((ab = .02)\) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples included zero \((95\% \text{ CI} = [-.02, .07])\) indicating the absence of a significant indirect effect.

**Coparenting Support as a Mediator.** Four models were tested using coparenting support as a mediator. Model one included reports of gate opening at three months postpartum and dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum. Fathers who reported
higher levels of gate opening also experienced higher levels of coparenting support \((a = .57)\). Fathers who reported higher levels of coparenting support, in turn, experienced higher levels of dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum \((b = .25)\). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect \((ab = .14)\) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero \((95\% \text{ CI} = [.07, .24])\) indicating a significant indirect effect.

Model two included reports of gate opening at three months postpartum and negative interaction at nine months postpartum. Fathers who reported higher levels of gate opening also experienced higher levels of coparenting support \((a = .57)\). Fathers who reported higher levels of coparenting support, in turn, experienced lower levels of negative interaction at nine months postpartum \((b = -.18)\). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect \((ab = -.39)\) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely below zero \((95\% \text{ CI} = [-.18, -.04])\) indicating a significant indirect effect.

Model three included reports of gate closing at three months postpartum and dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum. Fathers who reported lower levels of gate closing also experienced higher levels of coparenting support \((a = -.48)\). Fathers who reported higher levels of coparenting support, in turn, experienced higher levels of dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum \((b = .15)\). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect \((ab = -.07)\) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely below zero \((95\% \text{ CI} = [-.16, -.02])\) indicating a significant indirect effect.

Model four included reports of gate closing at three months postpartum and negative interaction at nine months postpartum. Fathers who reported lower levels of gate
closing also experienced higher levels of coparenting support \((a = -0.49)\). Fathers who reported higher levels of coparenting closeness, in turn, experienced lower levels of negative interaction at nine months postpartum \((b = -0.08)\). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect \((ab = 0.04)\) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero \((95\% \text{ CI} = [0.004, 0.10])\) indicating a significant indirect effect.
Chapter 4: Discussion

The current study aimed to understand how fathers’ perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behaviors may be associated with their later perceptions of relationship functioning and how these associations may be mediated by fathers’ perceptions of coparenting closeness and support. Of the eight mediation models tested, seven indicated the presence of a significant indirect effect. Therefore, coparenting closeness and support do appear to mediate the associations between fathers’ perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behavior and later perceptions of relationship functioning. In other words, when fathers perceived greater gate opening and less gate closing from mothers, they perceived their coparenting relationships as closer and more supportive, which was in turn associated with better functioning in the romantic relationship between the partners. This finding supports family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997) in that it supports the idea that subsystems of the family are interdependent. Additionally, this study was the first to connect maternal gate opening and closing behaviors with subsequent relationship functioning at the transition to parenthood, as well as the first to posit and test a mechanism for this association. This is an important step forward in advancing the relatively small amount of previous work connecting maternal gatekeeping and
relationship functioning (Schoppe-Sullivan, Altenburger, Lee, Bower, & Kamp Dush, 2015), especially given that previous work focused on mothers’ experiences.

One finding from this study of particular interest is the association between not only gate opening and coparenting closeness or support in a positive direction, but also gate opening’s positive association with dyadic adjustment and negative association with negative interaction. Some work on gate opening has suggested that it may be detrimental to the coparenting relationship because it could be viewed by fathers as maternal demands or nagging for increased father involvement (Fagan & Cherson, 2015); however, that study used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study where fathers are mostly nonresidential. Our study suggests that in this sample of more stable, coresidential, dual-earner families, headed primarily by married parents, gate opening is more positive as it is viewed as an indicator of more coparenting closeness and support instead of an indicator that the mother feels the father should be contributing more to parenting the child, in line with other previous work finding positive benefits for gate opening behaviors (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008).

It is important to note that an indirect effect was not supported for the model examining the association between gate closing and negative interaction through coparenting closeness. Coparenting closeness refers to how much the individual feels that his or her couple relationship has been enhanced by the coparenting relationship (Feinberg et al., 2012). Perhaps the feelings of enhancement in one’s relationship may work differently for different fathers, resulting in null results. Perhaps some fathers with increased feelings of coparenting closeness will perceive or engage in less negative
interaction because of feeling closer to their partner. In contrast, perhaps other fathers may feel liberated to express certain concerns because of these enhanced feelings of closeness, in turn leading to more negative interaction. Identifying potential moderators of the associations between maternal gate closing behavior and negative interactions within the couple relationship is an important direction for future research in this area.

**Limitations**

Although this study has taken an important step forward into an understudied area in the literature, it is important to note some of its limitations. First, because the New Parents Project aimed to understand the experience of the transition to parenthood for first-time parents in dual-earner couples, the sample is primarily White, highly educated, and of middle to high socio-economic status and results should not be generalized to populations that do not share these characteristics; however, given that more families have dual earners than in the past, these findings are useful for understanding a common modern family system. Future studies should examine the associations among maternal gatekeeping, coparenting, and romantic relationship functioning in more diverse samples. In particular, it may be important to examine these associations in a sample of lower socioeconomic status, since previous work has shown that fathers in lower-socioeconomic samples may perceive gate opening differently (Fagan & Cherson, 2015).

Second, missing data were handled using listwise deletion; therefore, analyses were lower in power than they would have been had a method for imputing missing data been used. Additionally, results may be biased in favor of the type of fathers who had information for all variables in each model, particularly in favor of married fathers.
Although the final sample of 140 fathers included 15 cohabiting, unmarried fathers, those fathers deleted from the study were significantly more likely to be unmarried than married. Thus, the current study’s findings primarily apply to married fathers who reside with children’s mothers.

**Implications**

Results from this study have implications for future research, as well as for the work of therapists and practitioners. Given the significant indirect effects found, future research should continue to probe for more mediating mechanisms linking maternal gatekeeping and the couple relationship. Future directions for this work will also include examination of potential moderators of these supported mediation models. These results affirm and further past work that shows that the coparenting and couple relationships are associated (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). Therefore, therapists and practitioners can use this knowledge to tailor their interventions to best fit their clients; for some couples with children, the origins of presenting issues in the couple relationship may actually lie in the faults in the coparenting relationship.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding individuals as part of their family system. In particular, these results highlight the idea that maternal gatekeeping behaviors not only play an important role in father involvement in parenting, but also in the functioning of the couple relationship. Given that healthy couple and coparenting relationships are important for child outcomes (Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010), these results illuminate another pathway through which maternal gatekeeping touches other aspects of the family system. Therefore, it is
important for future research to continue to test for not only the relationships between individuals, but also the associations between family subsystem relationships (e.g., the coparenting and couple relationships), as these associations may be driving the changes and experiences of individual family members, as was the case in this study.
References


Appendix A. Tables and Figures
Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Means ($M$), Standard Deviations ($SD$), and Bivariate Correlations of Key Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 3M GC</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>1.00 – 4.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 3M GO</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>1.56 – 5.78</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 3M CC</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>1.50 – 6.00</td>
<td>-.44**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 3M CopSup</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>1.33 – 6.00</td>
<td>-.43**</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>.76**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 9M DAS</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>2.75 – 6.00</td>
<td>-.37**</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. 9M NegInt</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>1.00 – 3.00</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td>-.44**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 3M GC = Gate closing at three months postpartum; 3M GO = Gate opening at three months postpartum; 3M CopClo = Coparenting closeness at three months postpartum; 3M CopSup = Coparenting support at three months postpartum; 9M DAS = Dyadic adjustment at nine months postpartum; 9M NegInt = Negative interaction at nine months postpartum.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. 
Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Figure 1.