



New Fathers' Perceptions of Dyadic Adjustment: The Roles of Maternal Gatekeeping and Coparenting Closeness

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Although the association between maternal gatekeeping and relationship functioning has been explored by a few studies, none of these have focused on fathers' perceptions of these constructs. Given that today's new fathers are challenged by elevated expectations for active parenting and coparenting even as most new mothers remain primary caregivers of infant children, this is a critical omission. This study examined the associations between new fathers' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping and change in dyadic adjustment as mediated through coparenting closeness. Maternal gatekeeping was reported by 182 fathers at 3 months postpartum, coparenting closeness was reported at 3 and 6 months postpartum, and dyadic adjustment was reported during the third trimester of pregnancy and at 9 months postpartum. Fathers' perceptions of relative change in coparenting closeness from 3 to 6 months mediated associations between fathers' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping at 3 months and relative change in dyadic adjustment from the third trimester to 9 months postpartum. In particular, findings indicate that greater perceived maternal gate opening was associated with higher levels of dyadic adjustment through higher levels of coparenting closeness, whereas greater perceived maternal gate closing was associated with lower levels of dyadic adjustment through lower levels of coparenting closeness. This study highlights the importance of studying fathers in the context of the family system and the role of the coparenting relationship at the transition to parenthood in couple relationship functioning.

Keywords: Coparenting; Maternal Gatekeeping; Fathering; Dyadic Adjustment; Transition to Parenthood

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INTRODUCTION

The transition to parenthood is an exciting, yet tumultuous time in the family whereby family roles and functioning change. 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 whom they are jointly invested (Feinberg, 2003). In addition to the emergence of the coparenting relationship, the addition of a child brings changes and potential stressors to the couple's romantic relationship. 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). 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. Understanding these mechanisms will inform prevention and intervention efforts targeted at improving family relationships at the transition to parenthood (e.g., Feinberg & Kan, 2008).

This study examined what relationship processes may be at play in changes in fathers' perceptions of couple relationship functioning over the transition to parenthood using data from a longitudinal study of dual-earner, first-time, different-sex parents. In particular, this study focused on how elements of the coparenting relationship—specifically maternal gatekeeping (i.e., mothers' encouragement or discouragement of fathers' parenting) and coparenting closeness (i.e., how much coparents are growing together due to their shared parenting experience)—may predict change in fathers' perceptions of couple relationship functioning (i.e., dyadic adjustment) over the transition to parenthood. Moreover, this study went beyond identifying this by testing coparenting closeness as a mediator of these associations.

The current study is the first to connect the coparenting construct of maternal gatekeeping and the couple relationship with a focus on the perspectives of fathers. Given that fathers are on the receiving end of maternal gatekeeping behaviors, and that father-child relationships may be particularly susceptible to coparenting dynamics (Brown, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangeldorf, & Neff, 2010), this is a critical step forward in advancing our knowledge of family system functioning at the transition to parenthood. Additionally, understanding fathers' perceptions of family relations over the transition to parenthood is increasingly important as fathers navigate higher expectations for active involvement in parenting and coparenting (Cherlin, 2016; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015; Pleck, 2010; Yoshida, 2012), while at the same time persistent cultural norms continue to situate mothers as primary caregivers and established gatekeepers in the parenting domain (Hays, 1996; Schoppe-Sullivan & Altenburger, 2018; Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015).

FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY: THE COPARENTING AND COUPLE SUBSYSTEMS

Family systems theory (FST) postulates that individuals can only be understood in the context of their relationships (Cox & Paley, 1997). According to FST, families are more than simply the sum of their parts; families are systems made up of subsystems. These subsystems are interdependent and can include the couple's romantic subsystem, the parent-child subsystem, the sibling subsystem, and the coparenting subsystem. To best understand both families and individual members, it is important to go beyond questions on an individual level and study the relationships that exist in the subsystem level. The executive subsystem of the family is the coparenting relationship (Minuchin, 1974), or the

relationship that two or more caregivers hold in relation to a child in whom they have a shared vested interest (Feinberg, 2003). Although related, the coparenting subsystem is distinct from the couple's romantic relationship subsystem as it pertains specifically to the shared parenting role and does not include other relationships (e.g., romantic) between those caregivers (Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004). The coparenting relationship generally consists of supportive and undermining behaviors, childrearing agreement, the division of parental duties, and the management of family relationships (Feinberg, 2003).

Family systems research has established associations between the couple relationship (typically in the form of marital quality) and dimensions of coparenting (e.g., Holland & McElwain, 2013; McClain & Brown, 2017; Schoppe-Sullivan, Altenburger, Lee, Bower, & Kamp Dush, 2015). This work usually places marital quality as the predictor and coparenting or general parenting practices as the outcome variable (Morrill, 2010). Typically, higher ratings 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 observed competitive coparenting and were less involved in parenting; in the same context, mothers were less supportive in their coparenting relationship (Christopher et al., 2015). Research also supports bidirectional associations between coparenting quality and marital quality (Le, McDaniel, Leavitt, & Feinberg, 2016; Morrill, 2010; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004), consistent with FST.

The emergence of the coparenting relationship and its distinction from the couple relationship comes at the transition to parenthood, at the same time the average couple experiences declines in relationship satisfaction and increases in marital conflict (Kluwer, 2010). Although previous work has tested couple relationship indicators and individual characteristics of parents as potential causal factors in these declines in relationship satisfaction (Kluwer, 2010), fewer studies have examined how the coparenting relationship may be predictive of marital change over the transition to parenthood. 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). Schoppe-Sullivan et al. explained that this could be because coparenting is a central task for families with young children; thus, the addition of a child fundamentally alters the established marital relationship and early coparenting relationship quality sets the tone for the continued development of family relationships. Schoppe-Sullivan et al.'s findings lend rationale to studying associations between coparenting and the couple relationship with coparenting dimensions conceptualized as predictors.

Additionally, becoming parents together may foster greater emotional intimacy between partners or greater emotional distance. This aspect of the coparenting relationship is known as coparenting closeness and reflects the extent to which coparents grow together via their shared parenting experience (e.g., celebrating the child's achievement of developmental milestones, enjoyment of the partner's development into a parent; Feinberg, Brown, & Kan, 2012). Given that the transition to parenthood is a time of particular growth in parenting and the coparenting relationship, coparenting closeness may be particularly important to examine at the transition to parenthood.

MATERNAL GATEKEEPING

Maternal gatekeeping is another component of the coparenting relationship (Schoppe-Sullivan & Altenburger, 2018), and was originally defined as beliefs and behaviors that inhibit father involvement in family work, including childrearing (Allen & Hawkins,

1999). Maternal gatekeeping is commonly understood as a relational phenomenon that emerges from the intersection of parental roles with societal expectations about gender; men and women develop different ideas of parenting standards based on their gender identity, such that those with more traditional gender values may be more likely to subscribe to the “mom as nurturer and dad as breadwinner” parenting model (e.g., Adamsons, 2010). Maternal gatekeeping behaviors emerge at the transition to parenthood and have been identified using surveys and observations early in the child’s first year (Cannon, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008; Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2010). Reports of maternal gatekeeping at 3 months postpartum have also predicted observed and reported father involvement in parenting (Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008).

More recent conceptualizations have acknowledged that maternal gatekeeping behaviors can encourage and discourage fathers’ involvement in parenting (Puhlman & Pasley, 2013; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Maternal gatekeeping behaviors that encourage and positively reinforce fathers’ active parenting involvement are called gate opening behaviors (e.g., mother compliments the father’s parenting—either directly or to others when the father can overhear), whereas behaviors that discourage fathers’ parenting are called gate closing behaviors (e.g., mother criticizes the father’s parenting; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008; Van Egeren, 2000). Gate closing behaviors are conceptualized as detrimental to the coparenting relationship, leading fathers to withdraw from coparenting and parenting (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Gate opening behaviors have a mixed view. Some work has found that gate opening behaviors do predict increased father involvement, thereby promoting the father–child relationship and coparenting (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Other work has found fathers’ perceptions of greater maternal gate opening behaviors to enhance father involvement, but mothers’ perceptions of greater maternal gate opening behaviors to be detrimental to father involvement (Fagan & Cherson, 2015). Thus, it appears that perceptions of gate opening may differ for mothers and fathers (Schoppe-Sullivan & Altenburger, 2018), and that how fathers perceive maternal behaviors may be critical for understanding the potential impact of maternal gatekeeping.

Understanding fathers’ perceptions of maternal gatekeeping may also be particularly critical over the transition to parenthood and at this time in history. Despite increasing expectations for fathers to be involved parents and actual increases in their time spent parenting (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004; Yoshida, 2012), mothers are still culturally recognized as the more expert parents (Pepin & Cotter, 2018; Schoppe-Sullivan & Altenburger, 2018; Yavorsky et al., 2015). How fathers navigate these conflicting expectations while also spending more time in a domain traditionally held by mothers is important, given that fathers may retreat from fathering in both quantity and quality if they feel particularly conflicted about their role in this new family system (Altenburger, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Kamp Dush, 2018; Schoppe-Sullivan & Altenburger, 2018).

There has been no prior research that has linked maternal gate opening and gate closing behaviors to the functioning of the couple relationship from the father’s perspective. Despite the prevalence of work on the associations between coparenting and the couple relationship, no prior studies have examined fathers’ perceptions of maternal gatekeeping in these associations. Given that fathers are the recipients of maternal gatekeeping behavior in a time marked by increased expectations for father involvement (Cherlin, 2016; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Pleck, 2010; Yoshida, 2012) and that maternal gatekeeping is a critical aspect of the coparenting relationship, this is an important omission from the literature.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The aim of the present study was to connect fathers' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behaviors with their perceptions of change in dyadic adjustment from the third trimester of pregnancy to 9 months postpartum, using four time points of survey data (third trimester, 3, 6, and 9 months postpartum). The 3 months postpartum time point was selected to allow families time to establish early family dynamics and relationships after the birth of the child. The 6 and 9 months postpartum time points were added to further assess the ways families navigate the transition to parenthood through many life transitions (e.g., parents returning to work) and the rapid development of infants over the first year of life (Berk & Meyers, 2016). These points of data collection provided an opportunity to examine how feelings and perceptions pertaining to the family and the couple changed over this time period.

Mothers' relationship perceptions predict their gatekeeping behaviors (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015) such that when mothers feel less sure about the future of their relationship pre-birth, they are more likely to exhibit gate closing behaviors post-birth. In contrast, as the recipients of maternal gatekeeping behaviors, fathers' experiences with maternal gatekeeping are likely to affect their experiences of coparenting and perceptions of the couple relationship.

Previous work has established that various dimensions of coparenting (e.g., alliance, cooperation, conflict) mediate or moderate associations between marital quality and parenting outcomes (Camisasca, Miragol, & Di Blasio, 2014; Pedro, Ribeiro, & Shelton, 2012). Given this research, and the notion that coparenting closeness may be a particularly important aspect of the coparenting relationship at the transition to parenthood, we tested coparenting closeness as a mediator of the associations between fathers' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping and dyadic adjustment at the transition to parenthood. In particular, we expected that mothers' encouragement or discouragement of fathers' parenting would enhance or detract from fathers' perceptions of coparenting closeness, which should in turn affect change in their perceptions of dyadic adjustment.

Earlier assessments of coparenting closeness (at 3 months postpartum) and pre-birth assessment of dyadic adjustment (measured at the third trimester) were included as covariates for coparenting closeness at 6 months postpartum (the mediator) and dyadic adjustment at 9 months postpartum (the dependent variable) to elucidate associations between predictors of interest and relative change in fathers' perceptions of coparenting closeness and dyadic adjustment across the transition to parenthood. In addition, father's age, race/ethnicity, marital status, and level of education were included in the models as covariates for both coparenting closeness (the mediator) and dyadic adjustment (the dependent variable). These four demographic covariates were included because previous research has suggested that men of differing marital statuses, education levels, ages, and races/ethnicities may experience the transition to parenthood in different ways (Cherlin, 2010; Kluwer, 2010). A conceptual illustration of the hypothesized model is shown in Figure 1.

The main hypotheses were:

1. Fathers' perceptions of greater maternal gate opening at 3 months postpartum will exert an indirect positive effect on change in dyadic adjustment from the third trimester of pregnancy to 9 months postpartum through relative increases in coparenting closeness from 3 to 6 months postpartum.
2. Fathers' perceptions of maternal gate closing at 3 months postpartum will exert an indirect negative effect on change in dyadic adjustment from the third trimester of pregnancy to 9 months postpartum through relative decreases in coparenting closeness from 3 to 6 months postpartum.

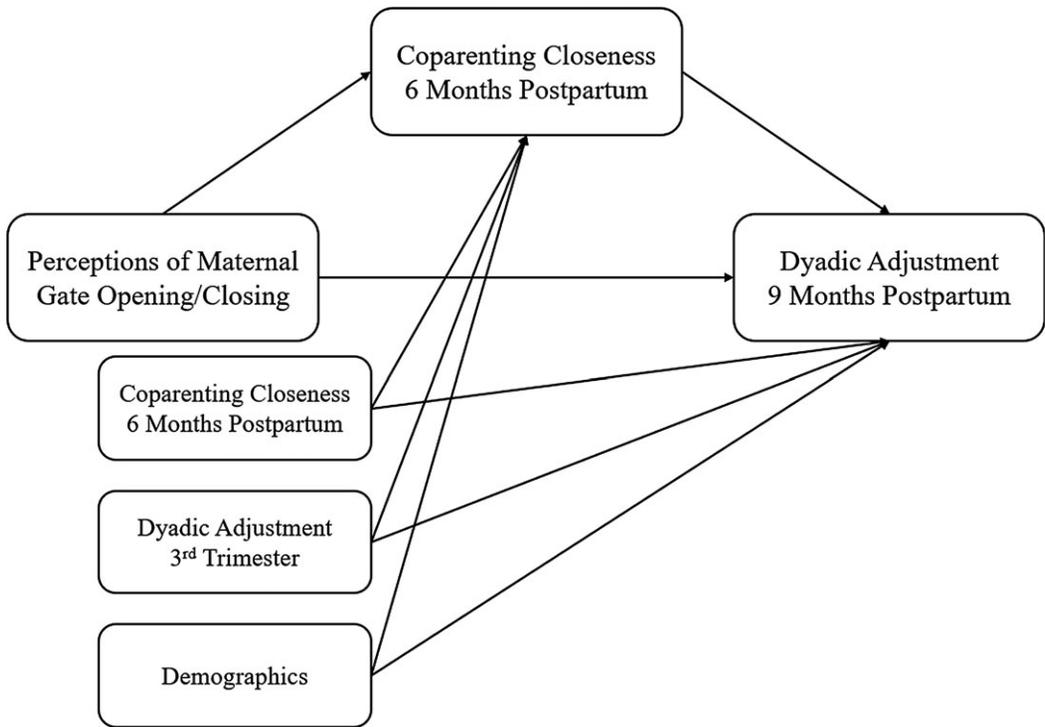


FIGURE 1. Fathers' perceptions of coparenting closeness mediate relations between perceptions of maternal gatekeeping and dyadic adjustment.

METHOD

Participants

This study used data from a longitudinal research project following 182 different-sex, dual-earner primiparous couples from a large Midwestern U.S. city and metropolitan area over their transition to parenthood. For inclusion in the study, couples had to at least be cohabiting (14%) if not married (86%). Both partners had to be working full time pre-birth with plans to return to work post-birth. Both partners also had to be fluent in English and at least 18 years old. Couples were recruited through childbirth classes, advertising in local newspapers, flyers at health care facilities and local businesses, and snowball sampling.

Fathers' ages ranged from 18 to 50 ($M = 30.20$, $SD = 4.81$). Families were of middle to high SES: The median annual family income was \$81,000 and 65% of fathers held at least a Bachelor's degree. Eight-five percent of participants identified as White/European American, 7% as Black/African American, 4% as Asian American or Pacific Islander, 3% as a race/ethnicity other than those listed, 1% identified as mixed race, and 2% of fathers identified as Hispanic/Latin American. Parents reported a variety of childcare arrangements, including care by a relative (e.g., grandparents), babysitter, or daycare center. At 9 months postpartum, 93% of fathers and 86% of mothers were back to work. No infant physical disabilities were reported.

Procedure

Four waves of data were used in this study. The first was collected during the third trimester of pregnancy. The second, third, and fourth waves were collected at 3, 6, and

9 months postpartum, respectively. Given that this study's aim was to examine relations between fathers' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping, coparenting closeness, and dyadic adjustment during the early postpartum months, most data used were drawn from surveys completed by fathers, with the exception of selected demographic control variables. All measures of key variables were reported by fathers and therefore should be interpreted as fathers' perceptions of these constructs.

Measures

Maternal gatekeeping

Fathers reported on maternal gatekeeping behaviors at 3 months postpartum using two subscales from The Parental Regulation Inventory (Van Egeren, 2000): maternal gate opening and maternal gate closing. Maternal gate opening and maternal gate closing subscales were made up of six summed items each (see Lee, Schoppe-Sullivan, Feng, Gerhardt, & Kamp Dush, in press). 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/every time*). Maternal gate closing ($\alpha = 0.70$) included items such as "how often does your baby's mother criticize you." Maternal gate opening ($\alpha = 0.85$) included items such as "how often does your baby's mother invite you to help."

Coparenting closeness

Fathers' perceptions of coparenting closeness were measured at 6 months postpartum using fathers' reports on a subscale of the Coparenting Relationship Scale (Feinberg et al., 2012). The coparenting closeness subscale ($\alpha = 0.73$) has five items and measures how much partners' experiences of parenting and coparenting bring them closer. The coparenting closeness items were rated from 0 (*not true of us*) to 6 (*very true of us*). An example item is "We are growing and maturing together through experiences as parents."

Dyadic adjustment

Fathers' perceptions of dyadic adjustment were measured at 9 months postpartum using The Brief Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Sabourin, Valois, & Lussier, 2005). The Brief Dyadic Adjustment Scale ($\alpha = 0.78$) yields a sum score of 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*).

Covariates

Six covariates were used in all analyses. Marital status was controlled for using a single item categorizing fathers as married (86%) or unmarried (14%) during the third trimester of pregnancy. Education was controlled for using an ordinal variable of 1 (less than high school) to 8 (Doctorate degree). Fathers' age in years was controlled for. Race/ethnicity was also controlled for with a categorization of non-Hispanic White or other. In addition, fathers' reports of third trimester dyadic adjustment were entered as a covariate to examine relative change in dyadic adjustment over the transition to parenthood. Lastly, we included fathers' reports of coparenting closeness at 3 months postpartum to increase the rigor of our analyses by testing whether relative changes in coparenting closeness from 3 to 6 months postpartum mediated the association between fathers' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behaviors and relative change in dyadic adjustment.

RESULTS

Analysis Plan

Preliminary analyses included inspection of descriptive statistics, missing data rates, and Pearson correlations among the key variables. The SPSS PROCESS Macro for mediation models was used for hypothesis testing (Hayes, 2018). Missing data were handled using Expectation Maximization (EM) (Gold & Bentler, 2000; Dong & Peng, 2013). All analyses were conducted in SPSS version 24.

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations were computed for key study variables within the estimated sample (Table 1). Intercorrelations ranged from 0.08 to 0.53 (absolute value), indicating negligible to moderate linear associations among the study variables (Davis, 1971). Overall, gate opening at 3 months postpartum was correlated positively with coparenting closeness at 6 months postpartum ($r = 0.37$), as well as negligibly with dyadic adjustment during the third trimester of pregnancy ($r = 0.08$) and at a low level at 9 months postpartum ($r = 0.18$). Gate closing was correlated negatively with coparenting closeness at 6 months postpartum ($r = -0.30$), as well as with dyadic adjustment at 9 months postpartum ($r = -0.32$). Gate closing and gate opening were modestly negatively correlated ($r = -0.23$). Dyadic adjustment at 3 and 9 months postpartum had average scores of 20.41 ($SD = 2.61$) and 20.68 ($SD = 2.40$) respectively, which were well above the clinical cutoff of 13 for distressed couples on the four-item version of the DAS (Sabourin et al., 2005). These descriptive statistics are consistent with a low-risk, community sample.

Missing data rates are listed in Table 1. EM was used to handle missing data because our overall rate of missingness was 12.27% and the highest rate of missingness was 32% for coparenting closeness at 6 months postpartum. Gold and Bentler (2000) showed success with using EM at overall missing rates of 16%, and Dong and Peng (2013) illustrated that EM performed similarly to full-information maximum likelihood and multiple imputation when estimating missing data at up to a 60% missing rate. Additionally, we considered our data missing at random (MAR), as other variables included in our model were associated with the missingness of data (Dong & Peng, 2013). Fathers who did not report dyadic adjustment at Time 4 reported lower dyadic adjustment at Time 1 [$t(35.59) = -2.19, p = .035, d = -0.57$]. Fathers' age was not related to missingness at any time point (p -values ranged from .58 to .96). Data from unmarried fathers were more likely to be missing at Time 3 [$\chi^2(1) = 7.56, p = .006$] and Time 4 [$\chi^2(1) = 5.26, p = .02$], but not at Time 2 [$\chi^2(1) = 0.99, p = .32$]. Data from non-White fathers were more likely to be missing at Time 4 [$\chi^2(1) = 5.10, p = .02$].

Mediation Model Testing

Two models were tested to examine the potential mediating role of coparenting closeness at 6 months postpartum in the associations between maternal gate opening or gate closing behaviors at 3 months postpartum and dyadic adjustment at 9 months postpartum (Hypotheses 1 and 2). For both models, a measure of gatekeeping at 3 months postpartum was entered as the independent variable, dyadic adjustment at 9 months postpartum was entered as the dependent variable, coparenting closeness at 6 months postpartum was entered as a mediating variable, and marital status, level of education, dyadic adjustment during the third trimester of pregnancy, and coparenting closeness at 3 months postpartum were included as covariates. Significance was evaluated using a 5,000 sample bootstrap estimation for a 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect (ab) instead of p -values, as suggested by Hayes (2018).

TABLE 1

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

Variable	M	SD	Range	Missing rates (%)	1	2	3	4	5
1. 3MGO	23.60	5.89	9–36	5.50					
2. 3MGC	15.78	4.83	6–33	6.60	–0.23**				
3. 3MCopClo	5.04	0.95	1.5–6	8.80	0.52**	–0.35**			
4. 6MCopClo	5.23	0.77	3–6	32.40	0.37**	–0.30**	0.53**		
5. 3TDAS	20.41	2.61	3–23	3.30	0.08*	–0.10	0.13	0.11	
6. 9MDAS	20.68	2.40	11–24	17.00	0.18*	–0.32**	0.40**	0.38**	0.32**

Note. 3MGO = Gate opening at 3 months postpartum; 3MGC = Gate closing at 3 months postpartum; 3MCopClo = Coparenting closeness at 3 months postpartum; 6MCopClo = Coparenting closeness at 6 months postpartum; 3TDAS = Dyadic adjustment during the third trimester of pregnancy; 9MDAS = Dyadic adjustment at 9 months postpartum.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Gate opening

Analyses of the gate opening mediation model revealed that the association between maternal gate opening behaviors and dyadic adjustment was mediated by coparenting closeness (see Table 2). When fathers reported higher levels of gate opening at 3 months postpartum, they also experienced relative increases in levels of coparenting closeness from 3 to 6 months postpartum ($a = 0.02$). When fathers reported greater relative increases in levels of coparenting closeness from 3 to 6 months postpartum, they also experienced relative increases in dyadic adjustment from the third trimester to 9 months postpartum ($b = 0.99$). Independent of coparenting closeness, the association between maternal gate opening behaviors and dyadic adjustment was not significant ($c' = -0.0110$, 95% CI $[-0.0601, 0.0381]$). A bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval for the indirect effect ($ab = 0.0211$) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (95% CI $[0.0032, 0.0539]$), which indicated that the indirect effect was significant, consistent with Hypothesis 1.

Gate closing

Analyses of the gate closing mediation model revealed that the association between maternal gate closing behaviors and dyadic adjustment was also mediated by coparenting closeness (see Table 3). When fathers reported higher levels of gate closing at 3 months postpartum, they experienced relative decreases in coparenting closeness from 3 to 6 months postpartum ($a = -0.03$). In addition, when fathers experienced greater declines in coparenting closeness from 3 to 6 months postpartum relative to other fathers, they also reported relative decreases in dyadic adjustment from the third trimester to 9 months postpartum ($b = 0.88$). Independent of coparenting closeness, the association between maternal gate closing behaviors and dyadic adjustment was not significant ($c' = -0.0532$, 95% CI $[-0.1091, 0.0027]$). A bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval for the indirect effect ($ab = -0.0253$) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely below zero (95% CI $[-0.0592, -0.0056]$), which indicated that the indirect effect was significant, consistent with Hypothesis 2.

DISCUSSION

As the first study to highlight relations between fathers' perceptions of maternal gate-keeping and the couple relationship, the current study examined how new fathers'

TABLE 2

Indirect Effect of Father Perceived Maternal Gate Opening on Father's Dyadic Adjustment through Father-Reported Coparenting Closeness

	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Mediator model (DV = 6M Coparenting Closeness) R ² = .69						
Constant	2.77***	0.63	4.39	<.001	1.52	4.02
3MGO	0.02*	0.01	2.52	.01	0.005	0.04
3TDAS	0.01	0.02	0.45	.65	-0.03	0.04
FEdu	0.01	0.03	0.41	.68	-0.05	0.07
3TFAge	-0.02*	0.01	-2.44	.02	-0.04	-0.004
FWhite	0.12	0.12	0.96	.34	-0.13	0.36
Unmarried	-0.04	0.15	-0.51	.61	-0.36	0.21
3MCopClo	0.44***	0.05	8.27	<.001	0.34	0.55
Dependent variable model (DV = 9M Dyadic Adjustment) R ² = .72						
Constant	8.47***	1.92	4.41	<.001	4.68	12.27
3MGO	-0.01	0.02	-0.44	.66	-0.06	0.04
6MCopClo	0.99***	0.22	4.48	<.001	0.55	1.42
3TDAS	0.25***	0.05	5.21	<.001	0.15	0.34
FEdu	0.22*	0.09	2.39	.02	0.04	0.41
3TFAge	-0.07*	0.03	-2.73	.007	-0.13	-0.02
FWhite	0.61	0.36	1.71	.09	-0.08	1.31
Unmarried	-0.75	0.42	-1.77	.08	-1.59	0.08
3MCopClo	0.59**	0.18	3.22	.002	0.23	0.95
	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Direct effect	-0.0110	0.0249	-0.44	.66	-0.0601	0.0381
Indirect effect	0.0211	0.0131			0.0032	0.0539

Note. 3MGO = Gate opening at 3 months postpartum; 3MCopClo = Coparenting closeness at 3 months postpartum; 6MCopClo = Coparenting closeness at 6 months postpartum; 3TDAS = Dyadic adjustment during the third trimester of pregnancy; SE = Standard Error; LLCI = Lower Limit of the 95% Confidence Interval; ULCI = Upper Limit of the 95% Confidence Interval.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behaviors are associated with their perceptions of change in dyadic adjustment and how these associations may be mediated by change in fathers' perceptions of coparenting closeness. A key strength of this study included the use of four time points of data spanning from the third trimester of pregnancy to nearly a year later at 9 months postpartum. Additionally, this study controlled for initial (third trimester) levels of dyadic adjustment and initial (3 months postpartum) levels of coparenting closeness; thus, results can be interpreted as reflecting associations of new fathers' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping and change in coparenting closeness with change in fathers' perceptions of dyadic adjustment over the transition to parenthood.

Both of the models tested indicated the presence of a significant indirect effect of fathers' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping on dyadic adjustment via coparenting closeness, consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2. Thus, coparenting closeness appeared to mediate the associations between fathers' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behavior and their perceptions of dyadic adjustment. In other words, when fathers perceived greater gate opening and less gate closing from mothers, they also experienced relative increases in feelings of closeness to their partners in coparenting, which were in turn associated with fathers' perceptions of relative increases in the functioning of the romantic relationship subsystem. Given the importance of the coparenting and couple relationship in both

TABLE 3

Indirect Effect of Father Perceived Maternal Gate Closing on Father’s Dyadic Adjustment through Father-Reported Coparenting Closeness

	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Mediator model (DV = 6M Coparenting Closeness) R ² = .70						
Constant	3.57***	0.65	5.52	<.001	2.30	4.86
3MGC	-0.03**	0.01	-3.03	.003	-0.05	-0.01
3TDAS	0.01	0.02	0.41	.68	-0.03	0.04
FEdu	-0.004	0.03	-0.13	.89	-0.07	0.06
3TFAge	-0.02	0.01	-1.88	.06	-0.04	0.01
FWhite	0.09	0.12	0.75	.45	-0.15	0.33
Unmarried	-0.02	0.15	-0.13	.89	-0.31	0.27
3MCopClo	0.46***	0.05	9.38	<.001	0.36	0.55
Dependent variable model (DV = 9M Dyadic Adjustment) R ² = .73						
Constant	9.76***	2.03	4.81	<.001	5.75	13.76
3MGC	-0.05	0.03	-1.88	.06	-0.11	0.003
6MCopClo	0.88**	0.22	3.98	.001	0.44	1.31
3TDAS	0.25***	0.05	5.16	<.001	0.15	0.34
FEdu	0.22*	0.09	2.42	.02	0.04	0.40
3TFAge	-0.07*	0.03	-2.60	.01	-0.12	-0.02
FWhite	0.62	0.35	1.75	.08	-0.08	1.31
Unmarried	-0.60	0.42	-1.42	.16	-1.44	0.24
3MCopClo	0.52**	0.17	3.00	.003	0.18	0.86
	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Direct and indirect effects						
Direct effect	-0.0532	0.0283	-1.88	.06	-0.1091	0.0027
Indirect effect	-0.0253	0.0140			-0.0592	-0.0056

Note. 3MGC = Gate closing at 3 months postpartum; 3MCopClo = Coparenting closeness at 3 months postpartum; 6MCopClo = Coparenting closeness at 6 months postpartum; 3TDAS = Dyadic adjustment during the third trimester of pregnancy; SE = Standard Error; LLCI = Lower Limit of the 95% Confidence Interval; ULCI = Upper Limit of the 95% Confidence Interval.

**p* < .05.

***p* < .01.

****p* < .001.

the quality and quantity of father involvement in parenting (Altenburger et al., 2018), understanding fathers’ perceptions of gate opening and gate closing behaviors may be particularly important for promoting father involvement and positive adjustment in the family system.

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 previous work connecting maternal gatekeeping with relationship functioning (i.e., Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015), especially given that previous work focused on mothers’ experiences. Findings of the current study are consistent with a key tenet of FST (Cox & Paley, 1997)—that subsystems of the family are interdependent; additionally, these findings are consistent with prior research indicating that stronger coparenting relationships are important for couple relationship functioning in families with young children (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). Understanding the role of specific aspects of the coparenting relationship (i.e., maternal gatekeeping, coparenting closeness) in the functioning of the couple relationship furthers our understanding of couple relationship change across the transition to parenthood and opens

the door for future research to examine more links among these family subsystems during this critical time in family development.

One finding of particular interest is the positive association of gate opening with coparenting closeness and dyadic adjustment. Some work on maternal gate opening has suggested that gate opening may be destructive to the coparenting relationship because it could be viewed by fathers as maternal demandingness or nagging for increased father involvement (Fagan & Cherson, 2015). However, in Fagan and Cherson's study, maternal perceptions of facilitation of father involvement, which were associated with lower subsequent levels of father involvement, were reported by mothers, whereas mothers' encouragement of father involvement, which was associated with higher subsequent father involvement, was reported by fathers. Our study confirms that gate opening perceived by fathers appears positive, as it may be viewed as an indicator of the mother's support of the father's parenting instead of an indicator that the mother feels the father should be contributing more than he is currently to parenting the child. These gate opening behaviors may be particularly important as fathers increase their time spent parenting and experience increasing cultural pressure to be involved parents (Cherlin, 2016; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Pleck, 2010; Yoshida, 2012). By having mothers open the door for fathers to take part in parenting, they may help alleviate or mitigate conflicting cultural messages that the father should be an involved parent but that the mother is the expert parent (Pepin & Cotter, 2018; Schoppe-Sullivan & Altenburger, 2018; Yavorsky et al., 2015). Additionally, our findings align with other work that indicates that gate opening behaviors may have a positive role in the family system (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008).

Limitations

Although this study has taken an important step forward by examining new fathers' perceptions of aspects of coparenting and couple relationships and their associations, it is important to note its limitations. This sample was primarily married, White, and of middle to high SES. Additionally, families were from primarily suburban and urban areas, were all dual-earner couples, and had various types of non-parental care available for their infants. Results may not generalize to populations that do not share these characteristics. However, dual-earner families are the norm in the United States today (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011); thus, these findings are useful for understanding a common type of modern family system. Future studies should examine the associations among maternal gatekeeping, coparenting, and romantic relationship functioning in more diverse samples.

Furthermore, all data used in the current study were derived from surveys completed by fathers. Using fathers' reports allowed us to highlight fathers' experiences with maternal gatekeeping behavior and coparenting, but may have inflated the associations among the variables due to shared method variance. Additionally, it should be noted that we did have an overall missing data rate of 12.27% and a higher rate of missing data at 6 months postpartum (32%), so it is possible that the estimates of model parameters may be less accurate than if we had complete data. However, we felt that the benefit of using data from all four closely spaced phases outweighed the unfortunate rate of missingness observed at 6 months postpartum. Finally, perinatal mood and anxiety disorders were not within the scope of this study, but could certainly impact family, couple, and individual functioning (e.g., Gawlik et al., 2014) and should be investigated in future research on fathers' perceptions of couple and coparenting relations at the transition to parenthood.

Implications

Results from this study have implications for future research, as well as for the work of therapists and practitioners. Given the significant role of coparenting closeness found in

this study, future research should continue to focus on this understudied aspect of coparenting, as well as consider other mechanisms linking maternal gatekeeping and the couple relationship. These results provide further evidence that the coparenting and couple relationships are associated (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). Therapists and practitioners who work with new parents should probe whether the origins of presenting issues in the couple relationship may lie in faults in the coparenting relationship. In addition, developers and providers of prevention initiatives at the transition to parenthood (e.g., Feinberg & Kan, 2008) should take care to address maternal gatekeeping behaviors, as well as attend to other aspects of the coparenting relationship. In particular, childbirth education could be an effective avenue through which expectant parents can be educated about the roles of maternal gatekeeping and coparenting behaviors in the couple relationship over the transition to parenthood.

In conclusion, this study emphasized the importance of understanding new fathers as part of their family systems. Maternal gatekeeping behaviors appear to not only play an important role in the quantity and quality of father involvement in parenting but also in the functioning of the couple relationship from the father's perspective. Given that strong couple and coparenting relationships are important for healthy child development (Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010), these results illuminate another pathway through which maternal gatekeeping touches other aspects of the family system. Future research should continue to examine 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 at critical points in family development, such as the transition to parenthood.

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