

Maternal Gatekeeping, Coparenting Quality, and Fathering Behavior in Families With Infants

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The present study examined the role of maternal gatekeeping behavior in relation to fathers' relative involvement and competence in child care in 97 families with infant children. Parents' beliefs about fathers' roles were assessed prior to their infant's birth. Parents' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behavior (encouragement and criticism) and coparenting relationship quality were assessed at 3.5 months postpartum. The authors assessed fathers' relative involvement and competence in child care using a combination of parent report and observational measures. Results suggest that even after accounting for parents' beliefs about the paternal role and the overall quality of the coparenting relationship, greater maternal encouragement was associated with higher parent-reported relative father involvement. Moreover, maternal encouragement mediated the association between coparenting quality and reported relative father involvement. With respect to fathers' observed behavior, fathers' beliefs and parents' perceptions of coparenting relationship quality were relevant only when mothers engaged in low levels of criticism and high levels of encouragement, respectively. These findings are consistent with the notion that mothers may shape father involvement through their roles as "gatekeepers."

Keywords: maternal gatekeeping, coparenting, father involvement

Mounting evidence highlights the positive consequences of father involvement in childrearing for children's development (Amato, 1998; Lamb, 1997; J. H. Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). However, fathers still lag behind mothers when considering their involvement in childrearing tasks (Hofferth, Pleck, Stueve, Bianchi, & Sayer, 2002). Thus,

researchers have continued to investigate factors that may facilitate or hinder father involvement. One important influence on father involvement is the extent to which mothers are supportive of or resistant to increased involvement (Hoffman & Moon, 1999; Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987; McBride et al., 2005). Although many mothers report that they would like fathers to be more involved than they are, other researchers have documented that as many as 60–80% of mothers *do not* want their husbands to be more involved (Beitel & Parke, 1998; Quinn & Staines, 1979). This apparent contradiction suggests that some mothers may feel ambivalent about fathers' increased involvement in childrearing. Some have suggested that mothers play the role of mediator or "gatekeeper" by either facilitating or curtailing the father's involvement (e.g., DeLuccie, 1995; Fagan & Barnett, 2003).

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Maternal gatekeeping is typically defined as a collection of beliefs and behaviors that may inhibit a collaborative effort between men and women in family work (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Specific gatekeeping behaviors can include assuming primary responsibility for childrearing tasks or criticizing the father's actions when he is involved. Mothers may engage in gatekeeping behavior for a variety of reasons, including a belief in the appropriateness of differentiated family roles, the need for validation of a mothering

identity, a pessimistic assessment of fathers' competence in child care, or the adoption of particularly high standards for child care (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Because the rationale behind gatekeeping behavior is to manage the father's involvement, it is important that we conceptualize gatekeeping more broadly, as consisting of both inhibitory and facilitative behaviors engaged in by mothers with the goal of regulating fathering behavior (see also Van Egeren, 2003).

The nature and extent of maternal gatekeeping can be considered an important part of the *coparenting relationship*, or the relationship between adults in the family with respect to parenting. Just as maternal gatekeeping is hypothesized to have effects on father involvement, theory and research suggest that stronger coparenting relationships may foster father involvement (e.g., Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; McBride & Rane, 1998). However, whereas many successful developments in the assessment of coparenting relationship quality have taken place since the early 1990s (McHale et al., 2002), conceptualization and operationalization of the gatekeeping construct have been difficult, perhaps because gatekeeping may occur in the context of some ambivalence on the part of mothers and because it consists of behavior that may be challenging to capture.

Several investigations have suggested the existence of maternal regulation and its influence on father involvement. For example, Palkovitz (1984) and Beitel and Parke (1998) found that both maternal and paternal attitudes about paternal roles were related to observed levels of paternal activity. Other investigations (Hoffman & Moon, 1999; McBride & Rane, 1997) have provided additional evidence that maternal characteristics and attitudes about paternal roles are meaningfully associated with support for and levels of father involvement. In 1999, Allen and Hawkins identified a subset of mothers they classified as gatekeepers and found that these mothers actually did 5 more hours of family work per week than more collaborative (cooperative) mothers did. Most recently, McBride et al. (2005) found that mothers' beliefs about the roles of fathers moderated the association between fathers' self-perceived commitment to parenting and their accessibility to their children, such that fathers' perceptions of themselves as highly committed parents were only associated with greater father involvement when mothers believed that the father's role was important.

Although these studies are suggestive, it is important to note that none of these studies has directly assessed the gatekeeping construct—the behaviors mothers engage in to regulate father involvement. Only one published study to date has operationalized maternal gatekeeping behaviorally. Fagan and Barnett (2003) examined relations among mothers' reports of maternal gatekeeping (mothers' preferences for completing childrearing tasks—e.g., discipline and decision making—themselves instead of permitting their partners to complete them), perceptions of father competence, attitudes about the father role, and father involvement. Mothers who placed greater importance on the father role reported that fathers were more involved with their children, results that are consistent with previous work. Furthermore,

mothers who perceived fathers as competent parents were less likely to engage in maternal gatekeeping behaviors, and mothers who reported more maternal gatekeeping reported that their partners were less involved. Despite the importance of these findings, this study was limited by its sole focus on the inhibitory dimension of gatekeeping and its reliance on maternal reports of gatekeeping and father involvement.

The Present Study

Perhaps because previous research has not assessed the behaviors that constitute gatekeeping, the existence of maternal gatekeeping and its potential to influence father involvement have been challenged. Many researchers have asserted that a father's involvement has much more to do with his own characteristics and motivations (e.g., beliefs about the importance of fathers; Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999; Nangle, Kelley, Fals-Stewart, & Levant, 2003) than with his partner's and that the gatekeeping notion misplaces blame on mothers for low levels of father involvement (Walker & McGraw, 2000). Thus, the reality of maternal gatekeeping as an important influence on fathering behavior remains in question. The present study addressed three questions: First, what are the relations between parents' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping behavior and fathers' relative involvement and competence in child care? Second, do these relations hold even after taking into account parents' beliefs about the roles of fathers and coparenting relationship quality, and more specifically, does maternal gatekeeping behavior mediate relations between (a) mothers' beliefs about fathers' roles and fathering behavior and (b) coparenting relationship quality and fathering behavior? Third, does maternal gatekeeping behavior moderate relations between (a) fathers' beliefs about fathers' roles and fathering behavior and (b) coparenting relationship quality and fathering behavior?

As the literature suggests effects of maternal gatekeeping on fathering behavior (e.g., Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; McBride et al., 2005), we hypothesized that when parents perceived mothers as engaging in greater encouragement and less criticism of fathers, fathers would demonstrate greater relative involvement and competence with their infants. Moreover, we expected that relations between maternal gatekeeping and fathering behavior would be maintained even after accounting for anticipated positive and significant relations of parents' beliefs about fathers' roles and parents' perceptions of coparenting relationship quality with fathers' relative involvement and competence. More specifically, we further hypothesized that maternal gatekeeping behavior would mediate relations between mothers' beliefs about fathers' roles and fathering behavior and between parents' perceptions of coparenting relationship quality and fathering behavior. These expectations were in line with our behavioral conceptualization of maternal gatekeeping as distinct from both parental beliefs and the overall quality of the coparental relationship and as comprising an important, tangible process through which mothers' beliefs or coparenting relationship quality may

affect fathers' behavior (McBride et al., 2005). Finally, we predicted that maternal gatekeeping behavior would moderate relations between fathers' beliefs and their behavior and also between coparenting relationship quality and fathering behavior. In particular, our expectation was that fathers' beliefs and parents' perceptions of their coparenting relationship would be more strongly related to fathers' relative involvement and competence when mothers engaged in high levels of encouragement and low levels of criticism. In a sense, this prediction comes closest to capturing the essence of gatekeeping and is supported by McBride et al.'s (2005) work, which found that relations between fathers' commitment to parenthood and their involvement only held when mothers also believed that the father's role was important.

We tested the hypotheses of the present study using a sample of couples assessed across the important transition that accompanies the birth of a child—a juncture that may be critical for establishing the nature and extent of a father's involvement with the new family member. Couples were surveyed during the third trimester of pregnancy and were again surveyed and also observed interacting together at home with their infants at 3.5 months postpartum. Expectations for fathers' direct involvement in child care have increased in recent years (E. H. Pleck & Pleck, 1997), and this type of fathering behavior may be most susceptible to maternal gatekeeping (Grossman, Pollack, & Golding, 1988). Moreover, early father involvement may set the stage for future fathering behavior. Thus, we employed assessments of fathers' relative involvement and competence in child care. A parent-report measure provided information concerning fathers' relative involvement across a variety of child care tasks, and observational measures derived from a specific, staged child care situation provided a snapshot of fathers' relative involvement and competence as they might be manifested at any given moment.

Participants were primarily dual-earner couples (73%), representing a wide range of family income levels, and 63% were first-time parents. Given these sample characteristics and research linking particular sociodemographic factors with fathering behavior, we controlled for the following variables in our analyses: parent status (first time vs. experienced), mothers' work hours, and family income. Specifically, prior research has indicated that mothers' (but not fathers') employment is consistently and positively related to levels of father involvement (J. H. Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). In addition, some previous research has also linked family income (e.g., NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000) and children's birth order (J. H. Pleck, 1997) to fathering behavior.

Method

Participants

Participating families ($N = 97$) took part in a longitudinal study of family transitions. Initially, 103 couples that were expecting a child (required to be married or cohabiting) were recruited to participate from two small cities in the

Midwest and surrounding areas. Couples were recruited from childbirth education classes and by flyers posted at local businesses, print and electronic newsletters, and word-of-mouth. Potential participants were invited to participate in a study of family transitions and informed that the purpose of the study was to examine individual- and couple-level characteristics that might influence the ease with which couples and families adjust to the arrival of a child. Data were collected at two phases for the study: during the third trimester of pregnancy and 3.5 months after the birth of the child. Data from 6 couples were not included in the present study for several reasons: 1 couple experienced a miscarriage, 1 couple separated, 1 couple contributed too little data to analyze, 2 couples moved out of state, and 1 couple's infant had severe medical problems (thus precluding participation in the 3.5-month follow-up).

Expectant parents in the sample for the present study ($N = 97$) had been married or cohabiting for an average of 4.10 years ($SD = 3.06$; 96% married). Sixty-three percent were anticipating parenthood for the first time. Expectant parents were mostly European American (83.3% mothers, 80.9% fathers); 5.2% of mothers and 7.4% of fathers were African American, 6.3% of mothers and 7.4% of fathers were Latino, 4.2% of mothers and 2.1% of fathers were Asian American, and 1.0% of mothers and 2.1% of fathers were of mixed racial/ethnic background. The average age of expectant mothers was 29.09 years ($SD = 4.58$), and the average age of expectant fathers was 31.82 years ($SD = 6.90$). Median parent education was a college degree. Specifically, 87.6% of mothers had at least a college degree, 11.5% had attended some college, and 1% had a high school diploma only. Of the fathers, 79.2% had at least a college degree, 16.7% had attended some college, 3.1% had a high school diploma only, and 1% had not completed high school. Family income ranged from less than \$10,000 to over \$100,000 per year; median income was \$51,000 to \$60,000 per year (14.7% of the sample). Eighteen percent of families earned less than \$30,000 per year, 30.5% of families earned between \$31,000 and 50,000 per year, and 36.9% of families earned greater than \$61,000 per year. In 72.9% of families, both parents were employed. In 19.8% of the families only the father was employed, and in 6.3% of the families only the mother was employed. Neither parent in one participating family was employed. Parents' work hours ranged from 0 to over 50 hr per week ($Mdn = 31$ –40 hr for mothers and 41–50 hr for fathers). Overall, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's *State and County QuickFacts* (2007), the population by race in the county was 75% European American, 11% African American, 8% Asian, 4% Latino, and 2% mixed race, and the median household income was \$39,227. Thus, African and Asian American families were somewhat underrepresented in the current sample, and the income of participating families was somewhat higher than those in the county as a whole, although these differences were not large.

All 97 expectant mothers gave birth to single, healthy, full-term infants. Infants were 3.71 months old at the time of the second assessment ($SD = 10.62$ days; 45 girls and 52 boys).

Procedure

Prebirth surveys probed parents' beliefs about the roles of fathers so that parents' experiences with parenting the target child would not affect their reported beliefs. After their child was born, parents were visited at home. Two weeks prior to the home visit, parents independently completed questionnaires assessing their perceptions of maternal gatekeeping, the quality of their coparenting relationship, and their relative involvement in child care activities. During the home visit, parents were videotaped while changing their infant's clothes together. These episodes were coded for paternal involvement and competence, as detailed below.

Measures: Prebirth

Beliefs about the roles of fathers. We assessed expectant parents' beliefs about the paternal role using the What Is a Father? Questionnaire (WIAF; Schoppe, 2001), adapted for the present study from the Role of the Father Questionnaire (Palkovitz, 1984), a measure that has demonstrated reliability and validity (i.e., relations with father involvement) across a number of previous studies (McBride & Rane, 1997; Palkovitz, 1984; Rane & McBride, 2000). The WIAF includes 15 statements about fathers that tap both nontraditional and traditional beliefs about fathers' roles (e.g., "fathers and mothers should spend an equal amount of time with their children"; "fathers should be the disciplinarians in the family"). Each item is rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Items were combined to form a total score (traditional items were reversed), with higher scores indicating more nontraditional or progressive beliefs about fathers' roles ($\alpha = .70$ for fathers and $.73$ for mothers; $M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.36$ for fathers; $M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.35$ for mothers).

Measures: 3.5 Months Postpartum

Maternal gatekeeping. Parents were asked to complete an adapted version of the Parental Regulation Inventory (PRI; Van Egeren, 2000), a questionnaire that asked fathers to report on their partner's gatekeeping behavior and mothers to report on their own gatekeeping behavior. Respondents used a 6-point scale (1 = *never* to 6 = *several times per day*) to describe the frequency with which the mother responded to the father's parenting behaviors with encouragement (e.g., "tells you how happy you make your child"/"tell your partner how happy he makes your child") or criticism (e.g., "looks exasperated and rolls her eyes"/"look exasperated and roll your eyes"). Preliminary research supporting the validity of the PRI has found that families in which mothers are more critical and less encouraging of their partner's parenting show poorer child and family functioning (Van Egeren, 2003). Summary scores measuring mothers' and fathers' perceptions of maternal encouragement (nine items) and criticism (eight items) were created by averaging across items. Because fathers' and mothers' perceptions of maternal encouragement ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) and criticism ($r = .40$, $p < .01$) both provided valuable

information concerning mothers' behaviors and were significantly correlated, they were averaged for use in analyses ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.66$ for encouragement; $M = 2.35$, $SD = 0.67$ for criticism; $\alpha = .86$ for both scales).

Coparenting relationship quality. To assess feelings about the coparenting relationship, parents completed the 30-item version of the reliable and valid Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI; Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Konold & Abidin, 2001), which was adapted to be appropriate for parents of infants. Several previous studies have found expected associations between higher PAI scores and greater father involvement (e.g., Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007; McBride & Rane, 1998). On the PAI, parents rated statements such as "My child's other parent and I communicate well about our child" on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Parents were instructed to complete this measure with respect to the child who was the focus of the study. A total score on this measure was created by averaging across the 30 items, with higher scores indicative of greater perceived coparenting relationship quality. Fathers and mothers demonstrated significant (although modest) agreement concerning their perceptions of their coparenting relationship ($r = .21$, $p < .05$). Given that coparenting processes are codetermined by relationship partners (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004) and that both partners' perspectives provide important information concerning the quality of the coparenting relationship, fathers' and mothers' reports were averaged ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.29$; $\alpha = .94$).

Fathers' relative involvement in child care: Reported. Parents completed independent versions of the Who Does What? questionnaire (Cowan & Cowan, 1990), a widely used, reliable measure of the division of labor (e.g., Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Lawrence, Nylen, & Cobb, 2007). As part of this questionnaire, parents were asked to rate on a 9-point scale (1 = *she does it all* to 9 = *he does it all*) who typically handles 12 child care tasks relevant for parents of infants (e.g., doing the baby's laundry and arranging for childcare). Total scores measuring fathers' and mothers' perceptions of the father's relative involvement in child care were created by averaging ratings for the 12 tasks. Fathers' and mothers' perceptions of father involvement were significantly correlated ($r = .66$, $p < .01$) and thus were combined for use in analyses ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.73$; $\alpha = .84$).

Fathers' relative involvement/competence in child care: Observed. At the home-based assessment, parents were given a "onesie" (bodysuit) and were asked to change the infant's clothes together. Specifically, parents were told, "Now we would like you to change your infant into this new outfit together." Thus, the instructions encouraged collaboration but were sufficiently vague so parents could decide for themselves their relative contributions to this task. These videotaped episodes (average length = 3.36 min, $SD = 1.15$, range = 1.40–8.03 min) were coded by a team of two trained students who were unaware of study hypotheses. Coders were each randomly assigned half of the videotapes, with the exception of tapes that both coders rated for reliability (28%). The dimensions used to rate fathering behav-

ior (adapted from Bayer, 1992) were as follows: *paternal competence* (father's observed confidence in his ability to interact with the infant; $M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.14$) and *father relative involvement* (amount of time father spends interacting with the infant relative to the mother; $M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.81$). Coders rated each episode for these aspects of fathers' behavior using 5-point scales (1 = *low* to 5 = *high*).

A father received a score of 1 on the paternal competence scale if he made frequent comments like "Daddy isn't doing a very good job at this," whereas he received a score of 3 if he portrayed himself as fairly confident when the infant was calm, but waffled in his confidence when the infant became upset. A father received a score of 5 if he demonstrated implicit knowledge of the infant's preferences, fluid interactions with the child, and no negative attributions about his competence. As for the father involvement scale, coders globally assessed the relative contributions of fathers and mothers over the course of the episode; inequities in involvement were noted, and the relative involvement of the parents was estimated along the 5-point scale. A couple received a score of 1 if the mother dominated interactions with the infant, a score of 3 if interactions were equally shared, and a score of 5 if the father dominated interactions with the infant. Agreement between coders within 1 scale point for the two scales was 100%, and gamma statistics (Hays, 1981; Liebetrau, 1983) were .97 and 1.00, respectively, reflecting acceptable reliability.

Results

Analysis Plan

To address our first research question, we examined correlations between parents' perceptions of maternal gatekeeping and the three measures of fathering behavior (reported father relative involvement, observed father relative involvement, and observed paternal competence). We also examined relations between demographic variables (mothers' work hours, family income, and parent status) and fathering behavior. With respect to our second and third research questions, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted (a) to test whether maternal gatekeeping was associated with fathering behavior after taking into account

parents' beliefs about fathers' roles and coparenting relationship quality, (b) to test the role of maternal gatekeeping as a mediator of relations between mothers' beliefs about fathers' roles and fathering behavior and between coparenting quality and fathering behavior, and (c) to examine whether relations of fathers' beliefs about fathers' roles and coparenting quality with fathering behavior were moderated by maternal gatekeeping.

Preliminary Analyses

Intercorrelations among study variables are presented in Table 1. As hypothesized, these correlations revealed that when parents perceived greater maternal encouragement, parents reported that fathers were more involved in child care tasks relative to mothers. In turn, fathers were perceived by observers as less involved with their infants relative to mothers when parents reported greater maternal criticism, although this association only approached significance. Also of note were significant relations between maternal gatekeeping and coparenting relationship quality: Parents who perceived their coparenting relationship more positively reported greater maternal encouragement and less criticism. Furthermore, coparenting quality was related to all three measures of fathering behavior, such that fathers were more involved relative to mothers and demonstrated greater competence in the context of a more positive coparenting relationship. Finally, parents' beliefs were associated with fathering behavior but not with maternal gatekeeping behavior. Specifically, when fathers had more progressive beliefs about fathers' roles, they demonstrated greater competence when interacting with their infants, and when mothers had more progressive beliefs, parents reported greater father relative involvement. The lack of significant associations between mothers' beliefs and their gatekeeping behavior precluded a full test of the role of gatekeeping as a mediator of the relation between mothers' beliefs and fathering behavior (Baron & Kenny, 1986). However, significant associations among parents' perceptions of coparenting relationship quality, maternal encouragement, and parent-reported relative father involvement set the stage for a full test of maternal encouragement as a

Table 1
Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Fathers' beliefs	—	.43**	-.01	-.14	.27**	.16	.10	.20*	.03	.18†
2. Mothers' beliefs		—	.07	.04	.18†	.23*	.04	.04	.07	-.01
3. Maternal encouragement			—	-.13	.43**	.36**	.05	.10	.18†	-.05
4. Maternal criticism				—	-.50**	-.07	-.18†	-.01	-.18†	-.15
5. Coparenting relationship quality					—	.23*	.24*	.25*	.10	.10
6. Reported father relative involvement						—	.19†	.18†	.36**	.05
7. Observed father relative involvement							—	.67**	.18†	.00
8. Observed paternal competence								—	.17†	-.03
9. Mothers' work hours									—	.44**
10. Family income										—

Note. *ns* vary from 92 to 96 as a function of missing values.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

mediator of the link between coparenting quality and reported father involvement (see below).

Given previous research linking particular sociodemographic factors with fathering behavior (J. H. Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), we also examined relations of mothers' work hours and family income with our measures of fathering behavior and conducted *t* tests to compare families on the basis of parent status (first time vs. experienced). Only mothers' work hours showed a consistent pattern of relations with fathering behavior (see Table 1); family income and parent status were not associated with fathering behavior. As planned, all three of these demographic variables were controlled for in subsequent regression analyses described below.

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

To address our second and third research questions, we computed a series of hierarchical regression equations, each predicting one of the three measures of fathering behavior (reported father relative involvement, observed father relative involvement, and observed paternal competence; see Table 2). In each equation, the set of demographic control variables (parent status, mothers' work hours, and family income) was entered on Step 1. Fathers' and mothers' beliefs about fathers' roles were entered together on Step 2 because they are considered to be primary predictors of fathering behavior (Bonney et al., 1999; Nangle et al., 2003) and because they were measured prior to the infant's birth. Next, parents' perceptions of coparenting relationship quality were entered on Step 3, followed by parents' reports of maternal encouragement and criticism on Step 4. This order of entry allowed us to test our second hypothesis, which was that maternal gatekeeping would be associated with father-

ing behavior after taking parents' beliefs and coparenting quality into account. Finally, four interaction terms were entered on Step 5 to test whether maternal gatekeeping moderated relations between (a) fathers' beliefs and their behavior (fathers' beliefs × maternal encouragement; fathers' beliefs × maternal criticism) and (b) coparenting relationship quality and fathering behavior (coparenting quality × maternal encouragement; coparenting quality × maternal criticism). Significant interactions were graphed at low and high levels of the independent variables (± 1 SD) and probed using simple slopes analysis (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006).

For the equation predicting parents' reports of fathers' relative involvement in child care, mothers' work hours were a significant predictor on Step 1, such that fathers were more involved in child care relative to mothers when mothers worked more hours ($\beta = .39, p < .01$). Parents' beliefs (Step 2) and coparenting relationship quality (Step 3) did not account for significant variance in fathers' reported relative involvement. In contrast, when entered on Step 4, maternal encouragement was a significant predictor ($\beta = .23, p < .05$). At Step 4, the overall model explained 22% of the variance in parents' reports of fathers' relative involvement (the interaction effects entered on Step 5 were not significant). These results, in the context of the correlations reported above, suggest that maternal encouragement may mediate the relation between coparenting relationship quality and reported relative father involvement. To more fully test this possibility, the equation was recomputed with the order of entry of the gatekeeping and coparenting variables reversed (Baron & Kenny, 1986). When doing so, maternal encouragement remained a significant predictor of father involvement ($\beta = .24, p < .05$), whereas

Table 2
Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Reported and Observed Father Relative Involvement and Observed Paternal Competence

Predictor	Reported father relative involvement			Observed father relative involvement			Observed paternal competence		
	β	ΔR^2	ΔF	β	ΔR^2	ΔF	β	ΔR^2	ΔF
Step 1		.13	4.35**		.04	1.15		.04	1.13
Parent status	-.03			-.12			.02		
Mothers' work hours	.39**			.16			.22 [†]		
Family income	-.11			-.06			-.13		
Step 2		.03	1.68		.02	0.94		.07	3.10*
Fathers' beliefs (FB)	.11			.15			.29*		
Mothers' beliefs	.11			.00			-.12		
Step 3		.02	1.76		.04	3.74 [†]		.04	3.31 [†]
Coparenting relationship quality (CRQ)	.14			.21 [†]			.20 [†]		
Step 4		.04	2.03		.04	1.96		.03	1.36
Maternal encouragement (ME)	.23*			-.20 [†]			-.11		
Maternal criticism (MC)	.01			-.11			.17		
Step 5		.02	0.41		.09	2.33 [†]		.05	1.27
FB × ME	.02			-.11			-.11		
FB × MC	.04			-.26*			-.08		
CRQ × ME	.11			.28*			.24*		
CRQ × MC	.00			.16			.19		

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

coparenting quality was not ($\beta = .04, p = .75$). We confirmed these findings by estimating the size and testing the significance of the indirect effect of coparenting quality on reported father relative involvement through maternal encouragement by using bootstrapping (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of maternal encouragement, estimated from 2,000 bootstrap samples (.0085 to .5331), indicated a significant effect.

When predicting observers' perceptions of fathers' relative involvement in child care, none of the variables entered on Step 1 (parent status, mothers' work hours, and family income) or Step 2 (parents' beliefs) were significant predictors. Coparenting relationship quality and maternal encouragement, when entered on Steps 3 and 4, respectively, approached significance. Parents' perceptions of maternal criticism, entered on Step 4, did not explain significant variance in fathers' observed relative involvement. On Step 5, two of the hypothesized interaction effects were significant predictors of fathers' observed relative involvement. The interaction between fathers' beliefs and maternal criticism ($\beta = -.26, p < .05$) is depicted in Figure 1. Simple slopes analysis revealed that the slope of the line representing low maternal criticism was significantly different from zero, $t(88) = 2.08, p < .05$, whereas the slope of the line representing high maternal criticism was not, $t(88) = 0.95, p = .35$. As expected, this indicates that the relation between fathers' beliefs and their involvement only existed when mothers were low on criticism. The second significant interaction, that between coparenting quality and maternal encouragement ($\beta = .28, p < .05$), is shown in Figure 2. For this interaction, the slope of the line representing high maternal encouragement was significantly different from zero, $t(85) = 2.82, p < .01$, whereas the slope of the line representing low maternal encouragement was not, $t(85) = 0.38, p = .70$. Thus, as anticipated, higher coparenting quality was only positively associated with greater relative

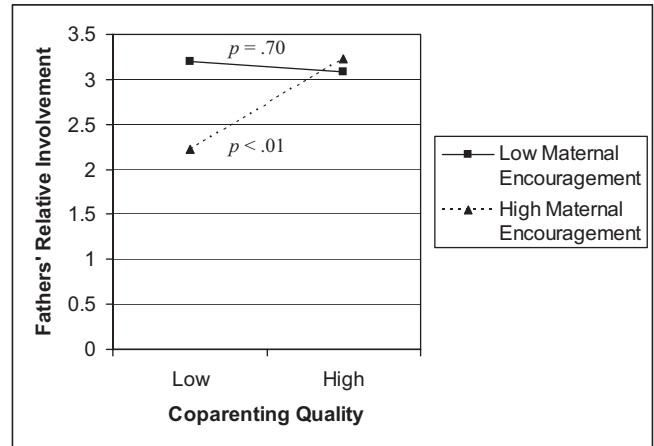


Figure 2. Interaction between coparenting relationship quality and maternal encouragement when predicting observed father relative involvement.

father involvement when mothers engaged in encouraging behavior. However, in contrast with our expectations, fathers appeared to demonstrate a relatively high and stable level of relative involvement under conditions of low maternal encouragement, regardless of coparenting quality. Overall, this model explained 24% of the variance in fathers' observed relative involvement.

Finally, when predicting observed paternal competence in child care, mothers' work hours approached significance on Step 1. On Step 2, fathers' beliefs (but not mothers' beliefs) explained significant variance in their competence ($\beta = .29, p < .05$), meaning that fathers with more progressive beliefs were observed to demonstrate greater competence when interacting with their infants. When entered on Step 3, coparenting relationship quality approached significance. Although maternal encouragement and criticism were not significant predictors when entered on Step 4, the interaction between coparenting relationship quality and maternal encouragement explained significant variance in fathers' observed competence ($\beta = .24, p < .05$). This interaction effect is depicted in Figure 3, and the pattern is very similar to that for the analogous interaction predicting observed father relative involvement (see Figure 2). A simple slopes analysis revealed that the relation between coparenting quality and competence was significant when mothers were high on encouragement, $t(85) = 3.15, p < .01$, but not when mothers were low on encouragement, $t(85) = 0.56, p = .58$. Thus, as hypothesized, higher coparenting quality was only positively associated with fathers' competence when mothers specifically encouraged fathers' involvement. However, it was also again apparent that fathers' observed behavior (in this case, paternal competence) was relatively high and stable when mothers were low on encouragement, regardless of coparenting quality. In sum, this set of predictors explained 22% of the variance in observed paternal competence.

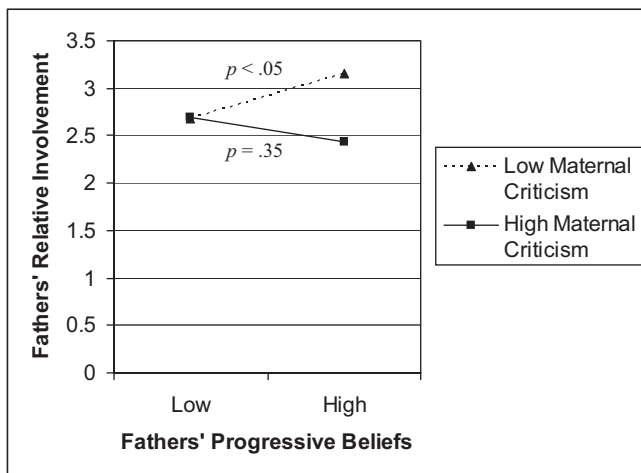


Figure 1. Interaction between fathers' beliefs about fathers' roles and maternal criticism when predicting observed father relative involvement.

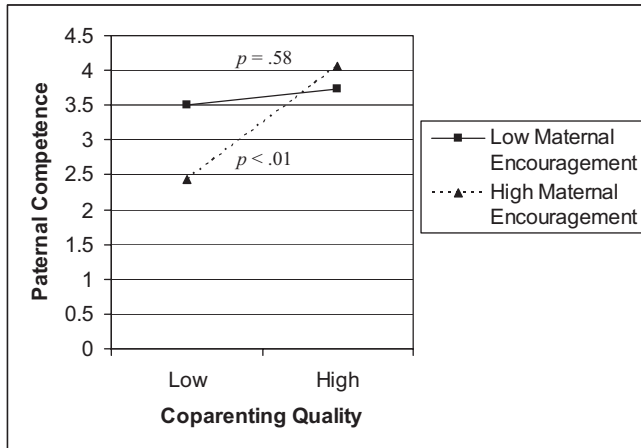


Figure 3. Interaction between coparenting relationship quality and maternal encouragement when predicting observed paternal competence.

Discussion

This study represents an important step in understanding the role of maternal regulation of fathering behavior in the two-parent family context. In particular, this investigation is unique in measuring parents' perceptions of actual maternal gatekeeping behaviors, rather than relying on maternal beliefs, attitudes, or identity as a proxy for the gatekeeping construct. As a result, this study helps to establish the potentially important, albeit modest, role of maternal gatekeeping in relation to fathering behavior.

Direct relations between maternal gatekeeping and fathering behavior were not as strong as anticipated. Only maternal encouragement remained a significant predictor of fathers' relative involvement after parents' beliefs about fathers' roles and perceptions of coparenting relationship quality were taken into account. Indeed, maternal encouragement mediated the relation between coparenting quality and reported relative father involvement. These findings are consistent with the notion that fathering behavior is multiply determined (McBride, Schoppe, Ho, & Rane, 2004; Nangle et al., 2003) and that mothers may be but one of a number of important contributing factors. Given the lack of significant relations between mothers' beliefs about fathers' roles and maternal gatekeeping, we were unable to fully test whether maternal gatekeeping also mediated the relation between mothers' beliefs and fathering behavior. Fagan and Barnett (2003) also failed to find a significant relation between mothers' beliefs about fathers' roles and their gatekeeping behavior. Thus, the assumption that mothers' gatekeeping behaviors are derived directly from their beliefs about the appropriate roles of fathers may need to be reexamined.

Stronger support was obtained for our hypotheses concerning the role of maternal gatekeeping behavior as a moderator of relations between fathers' beliefs and their behavior and between coparenting relationship quality and fathering behavior. Consistent with our expectations, we

found that fathers' beliefs about fathers' roles were only associated with their observed relative involvement in caring for their infants when mothers engaged in low levels of criticism. In effect, when mothers frequently criticized their partners, they may have "blocked" the relation between fathers' beliefs and their behavior. A similar effect was found by McBride et al. (2005), who demonstrated that relations between fathers' commitment to parenthood and their involvement only held when mothers believed that the father's role was important. However, the present study provided a critical extension of this previous work by utilizing a measure of mothers' actual gatekeeping behaviors. Although small in magnitude, this effect is exciting because it comes closest to capturing the essence of gatekeeping.

As anticipated, maternal gatekeeping behavior also moderated relations between coparenting relationship quality and fathers' observed behavior with their infants. In particular, coparenting relationship quality was only associated with fathers' involvement and competence when mothers engaged in high levels of encouragement. Previous work has supported the view that strong coparenting relationships may foster father involvement (e.g., Doherty et al., 1998; McBride & Rane, 1998), and our results indicate that the combination of a supportive coparenting relationship and an encouraging partner is one in which involved, competent fathering behavior is likely. However, we also found that notwithstanding coparenting quality, low levels of maternal encouragement appeared to be related to relatively high levels of observed involvement and competence. Moreover, when coparenting quality was low, fathers were *less* involved and *less* competent when mothers were *more* encouraging. Perhaps mothers do not feel the need to encourage fathers who are already sufficiently involved and competent. It is also possible that maternal encouragement may backfire when it is not in the context of a strong coparenting relationship. Regardless, given the particularly important role of maternal encouragement in mediating and moderating the effects of coparenting relationship quality in the present study, the findings support our conceptualization of gatekeeping as consisting of maternal behaviors with the potential to facilitate as well as limit fathering behavior. Thus, although maternal criticism is most prominent in conceptualizations of gatekeeping, we recommend that future research also consider both positive and negative aspects of gatekeeping behavior (see also Van Egeren, 2003).

Given the current study's design, it cannot be emphasized enough that the putative effects of maternal gatekeeping could just as easily reflect mothers' *responses* to fathers' behavior. This caveat became particularly salient through interpretation of the complex moderating effects of maternal encouragement described above but also holds with respect to effects of maternal criticism. Perhaps mothers don't "block" relations between fathers' beliefs and their behavior, but rather mothers criticize their partners more when their partner's behaviors do not match their beliefs. Longer term longitudinal research will be necessary to elucidate possible reciprocal relations between maternal gatekeeping and fathering behavior. Moreover, even if the causal process works as theorized, the effects of maternal gatekeeping,

although significant, appear to be small. Clearly fathering behavior is multiply determined (e.g., McBride et al., 2004; Nangle et al., 2003), and we do not intend to suggest that mothers are the primary determinants of fathers' behavior. This is underscored by the fact that fathers' beliefs about fathers' roles were a robust predictor of fathers' observed competence in the present study.

A potentially puzzling aspect of this study's findings is the different results obtained when predicting distinct aspects of fathering behavior, although context-specific effects of maternal gatekeeping seem to be the rule rather than the exception (McBride et al., 2005). Specifically, maternal encouragement (but not maternal criticism) was directly related to parents' reports of fathers' relative involvement, whereas maternal criticism and encouragement interacted with fathers' beliefs and coparenting relationship quality, respectively, in relation to observed fathering behavior. Key differences among the measures of fathering behavior may explain these discrepancies. Parents reported on fathers' relative involvement across a variety of proximal (e.g., changing diapers and playing with the baby) and distal (e.g., dealing with the child's doctor and choosing baby's toys) activities, whereas the observations of fathers' relative involvement and competence were derived from a specific, staged child care situation. Thus, the observational assessment provided a snapshot of the potential for maternal gatekeeping behavior to affect fathering behavior on a single occasion. In contrast, more time might be required for the overall distribution of child care involvement to experience the direct effects of maternal criticism and/or moderating effects of maternal gatekeeping.

It is also important to recognize that father involvement is multidimensional (Schoppe-Sullivan, McBride, & Ho, 2004), and thus, the current study examined only a small subset of fathering behaviors. Although expectations for fathers' direct involvement in child care have increased in recent years (E. H. Pleck & Pleck, 1997), as have absolute levels of such involvement (Hofferth et al., 2002; J. H. Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), many fathers continue to embrace more traditional fathering roles (e.g., financial provider). Moreover, two of our three measures of fathering behavior focused on the quantity of fathers' involvement with their infants relative to mothers. Recently, fathering scholars have argued that the quality, not quantity, of fathering behavior is most relevant for children's development (J. H. Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). The present study considered fathers' involvement and competence in caring for their infants because such behaviors may be most susceptible to maternal gatekeeping and may lay the groundwork for the high-quality father-child relationships that have been consistently linked to children's positive development. However, future research on the effects of maternal gatekeeping would benefit from the inclusion of more extensive relative and absolute measures of the quality and quantity of fathering behavior, which may yield different results.

Finally, characteristics of the present sample may have affected the particular findings obtained. The families who participated in this study constituted a relatively well-functioning convenience sample including fathers willing to participate in this type of intensive study. Thus, these find-

ings are likely not generalizable to nonresident fathers or clinically referred families, in which effects of maternal gatekeeping behavior, especially negative behavior, may be stronger. Moreover, our sample included both dual- and single-earner families. Although we controlled for mothers' work hours in analyses, relations between maternal gatekeeping and fathering behavior—and the motivations behind maternal gatekeeping—may differ in these types of families. Whereas some mothers in single-earner families may not desire father involvement nor view it as important, some mothers in dual-earner families may hold progressive beliefs about fathers and desire father involvement and yet feel ambivalent about relinquishing control over child care. Thus, especially when considering dual-earner families, maternal beliefs may not be equivalent to gatekeeping behavior, as was the case in our primarily dual-earner sample. Future research must more closely examine maternal beliefs, maternal gatekeeping behavior, and fathering behavior within the context of different maternal employment patterns. Additional work will also be necessary to determine whether patterns similar to those found in the present study apply to lower socioeconomic status samples and populations with greater racial and ethnic diversity.

Despite its limitations, this study provides perhaps the best evidence to date that the phenomenon of maternal gatekeeping exists and that, under some conditions, it may have the potential to affect fathering behavior. Thus, practitioners (including childbirth educators) working with couples during the transition to parenthood may do well to have both expectant mothers and fathers not only explicitly examine their beliefs about father involvement but also work to further expectant parents' understanding of their joint contributions to the father's future role in the day-to-day care of their child.

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