

## Longitudinal Patterns of Unmarried Resident Fathers' Engagement with Young Children in the U.S.: Examining the Role of Ethnicity and Extended Family Relationship

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This study examined the role of ethnicity and extended family relationship in the longitudinal patterns of unmarried resident fathers' engagement with young children in the U.S. Using three waves of panel data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), data obtained from 292 respondents were analyzed by the Linear Mixed Effects Regression (LMER) method. Findings suggested that Black unmarried resident fathers exhibited more engagement with their infants at age one than their White counterparts did, but the initial difference reversed by age five as a result of decreasing engagement among Black fathers over time and comparatively increasing engagement among Whites. Results also suggested that Black unmarried resident fathers with a high relationship level with their extended family members exhibited less engagement with their infants than Black fathers with a low relationship level, but the initial difference reversed by age five as a result of decreasing engagement among Black fathers with a low relationship level over time and comparatively increasing engagement among Black fathers with a high relationship level.

*Keywords:* Black father, extended family relationship, father engagement, father ethnicity, Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Linear Mixed Effects Regression, unmarried resident father

Increasing numbers of children are being born to unmarried parents. In 2005, nonmarital childbearing represented 36.8% of U.S. births with an increase of 12% over 2002 (Hohmann-Marriott, 2011). The proportions of the U.S. births that occur outside marriage are even higher among ethnic populations—at 70 percent among African Americans (McLanahan, Garfinkel, Reichman, & Teitler, 2001). Concerns about the increase in unmarried parents are related to the belief that unwed fathers are less

engaged with their young children than married fathers because they do not have the same legitimacy and rights (Johnson, 2001; McLanahan, Garfinkel, Brooks-Gunn, Zhao, Johnson, Rich, & Turner, 1998). As a result, children of unmarried fathers may be at risk of growing up without engaging fathers' caregiving, although father engagement is essential to the emotional wellbeing and development of young children who have caregiving needs (Hohmann-Marriott, 2011; Johnson, 2001; McLanahan et al., 1998). In response to the growing concern over the emotional wellbeing of young children born outside marriage, understanding engagement among unmarried fathers with their children is of critical importance. It is even more important

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to understand ethnic unmarried fathers' engagement with young children because of the high proportions of their births outside marriage. This study focuses on the role of ethnicity in unmarried fathers' engagement with young children by comparing African American fathers with White fathers.

One major limitation of studies in the area of unmarried ethnic fathers' engagement has been their reliance on a static perspective on father engagement measured at one time point during childhood. The placement of fathers in a developmental perspective is, however, critical because the changing nature of the father-child relationship as a function of the child's age needs to be considered (Parke, 2000). Consequently, little has been known about whether the engagement gaps between different ethnic fathers will continue to grow during the childhood or not. In response to this gap in literature, this study examines the longitudinal patterns of ethnic unmarried fathers' engagement with young children from the developmental perspective.

There also appears to be a strong connection between fathers' relationships with their extended family members and father engagement. Family systems theory suggests that the quality of relationships between the father and the mother's parents could affect father engagement; if fathers have positive relationships with the mothers' parents, grandparents may actively support the father to maintain strong engagement with their children (Ryan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2008). This study examines the role of ethnicity and extended family relationship in the longitudinal patterns of unmarried resident fathers' engagement with young children, using a panel data, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). In this study, father engagement is conceptualized as direct paternal contributions by fathers' interactions with the child in such activities as caregiving and play (Lamb, 1987).

## Literature Review

### Unmarried Resident Fathers' Engagement with Young Children

Recent findings suggest that unmarried fathers' engagement occurs at higher levels than we had previously thought, especially during the child's early years of life (Hohmann-Marriott, 2011; Johnson, 2001; McLanahan et al., 1998). Hohmann-Marriott (2011) found that, compared with married fathers, fathers who remained unmarried showed higher levels of father engagement, indicating a potentially greater child focus. McLanahan et al. (1998) also indicated that all of the unwed fathers in a study wanted to put their names on their child's birth certificate and to formally establish paternity. Although these findings provide us with a static snapshot about unmarried fathers' engagement that occurs at higher levels than perceived, little is known whether unmarried fathers' engagement with young children will continue to increase during the childhood or not in the longitudinal context, and how the longitudinal patterns of unmarried father engagement will differ over time depending on different ethnic types.

### Father Engagement and Ethnicity

Fathers' ethnicity can influence engagement with young children (Hohmann-Marriott, 2011). African American fathers are known as ethnic fathers who highly value their parental role within their family system characterized by a relatively equitable distribution of childcare responsibilities between mothers and fathers (Tamis-LeMonda, Kahana-Kalman, & Yoshikawa, 2009). Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1999) also indicated that the majority of African American fathers in their study showed high levels of engagement at the time of children's birth, during infancy, and when children were 3-year-old. However, nearly 40% of African American fathers showed instability in their engagement with their children over a period of 3 years, either significantly increasing or decreasing their level of engagement between the child's birth and their preschool years (Coley & Chase-

Lansdale, 1999). Meanwhile, Jain, Belsky, and Crnic (1996) indicated that actual levels of White fathers' engagement and performance in infant caregiving were substantially lower than those displayed by mothers. The degree of father engagement has been suggested to vary along with children's age by fathers' ethnicity. African American fathers engaged more with younger children compared to White fathers but it showed a declining pattern over time (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Jain, Belsky, & Crnic, 1996). Although research on ethnicity and resident father engagement indicated that Black fathers take on more responsibility for their children than White fathers (Hohmann-Marriott, 2011), little has been known about whether Black unmarried resident fathers are more engaged with their young children than White fathers or not. Although Johnson (2001) indicated that unmarried resident fathers' engagement varies by race and ethnicity, we know very little about whether father engagement gaps between different ethnicities will continue to grow during childhood or not. This study focuses on White fathers and African American fathers because these groups represent two of the largest ethnic groups in the U.S. In the 2010 U.S. Census, White population accounted for 72.4 percent of all people living in the U.S. and African American population represented 12.6 percent of the total population (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). These two ethnic groups also represent unique cultural backgrounds that reflect different fathers' role within the family system (Tamis-LeMonda, Kahana-Kalman, & Yoshikawa, 2009).

### **Father Engagement and Extended Family Relationship**

Parental identity and parenting development is primarily a compilation of experiences and observations over time, and the family of origin provides the cultural script in which these experiences and observations are acquired (Johnson, 2001). Family traditions and values passed on by relationships with parents and other adult family figures often shape the paternal

behavior and activities embraced by sons (Miller, 1994). Accordingly, a father's relationship with his parents influences his paternal engagement with children because of intergenerational learning in families (Johnson, 2001). Furthermore, Ryan, Kalil, and Ziol-Guest (2008) suggested that if fathers have positive relationships with the mothers' parents, grandparents may actively encourage the father to maintain strong engagement with their children based on the perspective of family systems theory. Ryan et al. (2008) thus suggested that a father's engagement with children was associated with his relationships with his extended family members including his own parents and the mother's parents. Ryan et al. (2008) found that the quality of relationships with extended family members was associated with changes in father engagement over time. More positive relationships that fathers have with their extended family members were associated positively with father engagement over time. These fathers as well as those who had less positive relationships with their extended family members showed varying magnitudes of gaps over time rather than showing a consistent pattern (Ryan et al., 2008). However, these effects of the extended family relationship on paternal engagement in the longitudinal context have been observed among unmarried nonresident fathers while the same effect was not found among unmarried resident fathers. It is thus necessary to expand our knowledge of the role of the extended family relationship in the increasing form of fathers' engagement with young children.

Based on the literature review, the following research questions were examined in this study:

- 1) Does unmarried resident fathers' engagement with young children continue to increase during childhood over time?
- 2) How does the longitudinal pattern of unmarried resident father engagement vary over time by fathers' ethnicity, especially among Black and White fathers?
- 3) Does the quality of relationships with extended family members act as a mediator for the relationship between unmarried resident fathers' engagement and ethnicity in the

longitudinal context?

## Methods

### Data and Sample

Data for this study were drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a longitudinal study which began in 1998. Data for the FFCWS were collected in 20 nationally representative cities around the U.S., stratified by labor market conditions, welfare policies, and child support policies (See Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001 for a detailed review about the research design). Both mothers and fathers were interviewed in 75 hospitals shortly after the birth of the focus child (baseline). Data were first gathered from 4,898 families at the baseline including 3,700 unmarried child births. Follow-up interviews with them were conducted when the child was 1, 3, and 5 years old (Reichman et al., 2001). About 98 percent of mothers and 95 percent of fathers were interviewed by phone at the three and five year follow-up surveys. Each time point data includes child's health condition, parents' relationship, parents' health condition, parenting behavior including father engagement, family history, demographic information, and other characteristics. Of the 4,898 cases in the baseline FFCWS data, the relevant sample for this study was restricted to fathers who fathers unwed at child's birth and living with the child at least half of the time with non-sole custody. Three variables were used to subsample unmarried and resident fathers from the FFCWS dataset as follows; if father and mother were married to each other when the child was born, if father has primary custody of child or not (year one), and if child live with father at least half of the time (years three and five). The final sample size was 292.

### Measures

*Father Engagement.* Father engagement was

used as a response variable in this study. Father engagement was repeatedly measured on the same individuals at three time points, that is, age 1, 3, and 5 of a child. The father engagement scale consists of the average of 10 items at each time point that asks fathers how many days a week the father engaged in various care-giving and play activities with their child. Such activities comprised of age-appropriate activities for each year of child age, such as playing outside in the yard, park, or a playground for a 5-year-old child, reading stories or tell stories to for a 3-year-old child, and putting child to bed for a 1-year-old child. The responses of each subject was summed up and then divided by the number of items included at each time point. The possible score of father engagement was from 0 to 7. It indicates that higher score means greater engagement. The mean of each time point are as follows: 4.5 ( $SD = 1.4$ ) at child age one (wave 1), 3.6 ( $SD = 1.3$ ) at child age three (wave 2), and 3.7 ( $SD = 1.4$ ) at child age five (wave 3). Correlation values among the repeated measures are as follows: Correlation between child age one and three is .44; Correlation between child age one and five is .4; Correlation between child age three and five is .5.

*Extended Family Relationship.* Unmarried resident fathers' relationship with their extended family was used as the other static predictor. This measure consists of two items asking how fathers get along with their own parents and with child mother's parents using a three point Likert type scale with 1 (not very well), 2 (somewhat), and 3 (very well) at child age five (wave 3). When the responses were summed up and then divided by two, the possible score was from 1 to 3 indicating higher score means fathers' better relationship with their extended family. The mean of extended family relationship is 2.642 ( $N = 292$ ). In the analysis procedure, the extended family relationship predictor was used as a dummy variable which is composed of 1 representing high extended family relationship group and 0 representing low extended family relationship group. The two groups were divided by equal counts. The high group is one that the

extended family relationship score are more than 2.25 ( $2.25 < \text{score} \leq 3$ ) and the low group is one that the score less than 2.25 ( $1.5 \leq \text{score} < 2.25$ ). The number of the high family relationship group was 143 and the low family relationship group's number was 149. The father engagement means of the high extended family relationship group at each time point are as follows: 4.5 at child age one, 3.7 at age three, and 3.8 at age five. The father engagement means of low extended family relationship group at each time point are 4.3 at child age one, 3.4 at age three, and 3.4 at age five.

**Father Ethnicity.** Unmarried resident fathers' ethnicity was used as one of the static predictors. Father respondents selected the ethnic type that best describes their own race among ethnic categories including White, Black, Asian, and Other at the baseline time point. This study includes subjects that were identified as White ( $n = 110$ ) and Black ( $n = 182$ ). The static predictor, ethnicity, is a dummy variable which is composed of 0 representing Black and 1 representing White. The father engagement means of White group at each time point are as follows: 4.3 at child age one (wave 1), 3.6 at child age three (wave 2), and 3.9 at child age five (wave 3). The father engagement means of Black group at each time point are as follows: 4.6 at child age one (wave 1), 3.6 at child age three (wave 2), and 3.6 at child age five (wave 3).

### Analysis Strategies

This study examines the effects of ethnic type of unmarried resident fathers and the relationships with their extended family members on paternal engagement with young children in the longitudinal context. One approach is with a step-up method, starting with a relatively simple model, a reduced model. The longitudinal data for this study are analyzed using Linear Mixed Effects Regression (LMER) method provided by the R statistical package program. LMER is a panel data analysis method that reflects the longitudinal change and pattern by considering both fixed effects representing

the group-level's change and random effects representing the individual-level's change (Long, 2012). The R packages used for analyzing the panel data, depicting statistical graphs, and comparing models are *lme4*, *ggplot2*, and *AICcmodavg*. In order to confirm the hypotheses about unmarried resident fathers' engagement, the step-up analysis strategy will involve the following three steps/models: (1) Model 1 is the unconditional model that has only time variable as a predictor in predicting unmarried resident father's engagement with young children over time, (2) In model 2, the intercept and slope effects of unmarried fathers' ethnicity are tested (i.e., whether Black unmarried resident fathers have higher initial scores in father engagement than White unmarried resident fathers and this difference persists over time or not), and (3) In model 3, the mediating role of extended family relationship between ethnicity and father engagement are tested. If the father ethnicity is statistically significant and this endures when the fathers' extended family relationship is added, then complete mediation can probably be ruled out. If the father ethnicity is not statistically significant when extended family relationship is included in the model, then that would suggest full mediation. If both extended family relationship and ethnicity are statistically significant, this can argue for partial mediation. That is, a portion of the ethnicity group difference might be accounted for by extended family relationship (and the converse), representing changing magnitude of the differences over time, rather than a constant one. Statistically significant intercept effects indicate that an initial father engagement difference exists, and a statistically significant slope effect are evidence that a father engagement difference does not stay constant over time. Regarding random effects, both random intercepts ( $b_{i0}$ ) and random slopes ( $b_{i1}$ ) in all LMER models were included.

### Missing Data

Regarding missing data in this study, the response variable (father engagement)'s proportion of missing cases by the extended

family relationship is 18.7 % (high extended family relationship) and 18.9 % (low extended family relationship). The response variable's proportion of missing cases by time is 21.3 % (child age one, 152 missing cases / 712), 23.3 % (child age three, 166 missing cases / 712), and 24.0 % (child age five, 171 missing cases / 712). On a practical level, omitting missing case rows from the long format data frame will not produce any biased results regarding mean change over time. The missing data approach used throughout this research is to omit a row of data from the long format data frame if there is at least one missing case in the row. Missing cases for extended family relationship measured at child age five were 95. Missing cases for fathers' ethnicity measured at child birth (baseline) were 217. These missing cases include other ethnic types, such as Asians, which are not focused by this study. The finally selected analysis cases for this study are 292.

**Descriptive Graphs**

The two smoothed curves below (Figure 1 and Figure 2) show that these curves are close to linear change curves, rather than nonlinear curves. Based on the inspection of the smoothed curves graphs, no change was made to the plan for analysis of linear models. The time metric of this analysis is child age one, three, and five. The time metric in this study does not have any transformation because this study is based on linear model that assumes the relationship is linear, which is supported by Figure 1 and 2. The intercept for this study is anchored at age one.

The plot of superimposed individual growth curves (Figure 3) below shows that some subjects increase over time, others decrease over time, but changes at the overall level appear to slightly decrease over time. The facet graph of individual change curves from a random sample below (Figure 4) also shows that there are more

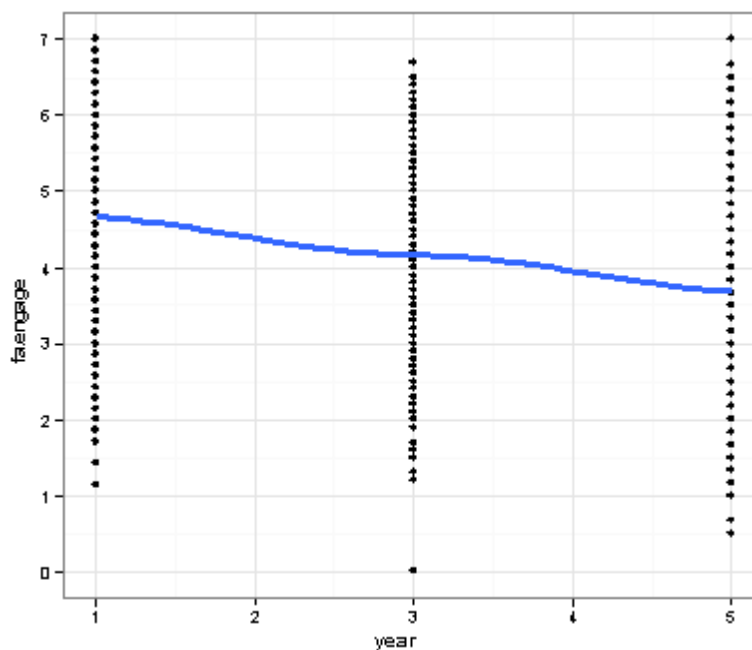


Figure 1. A smoothed curve for father engagement over time treating the data as a single group

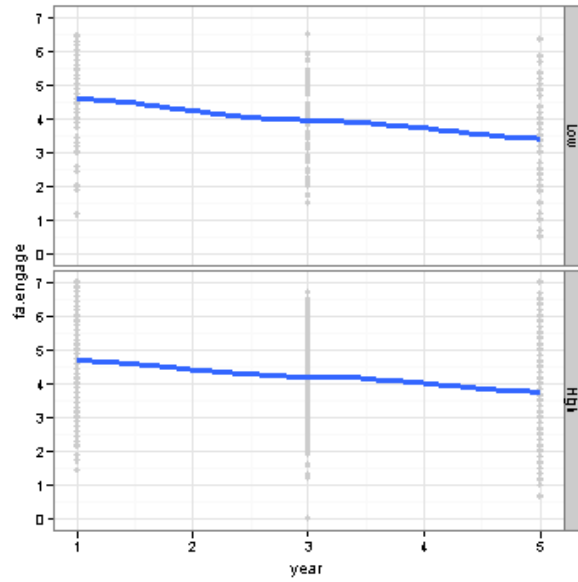


Figure 2. Group-level smoothed curve for father engagement conditional on low/high extended family relationship

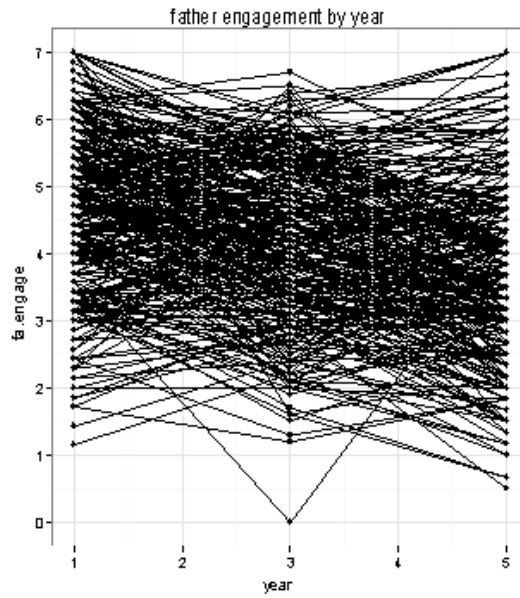


Figure 3. Plot of superimposed individual growth curves

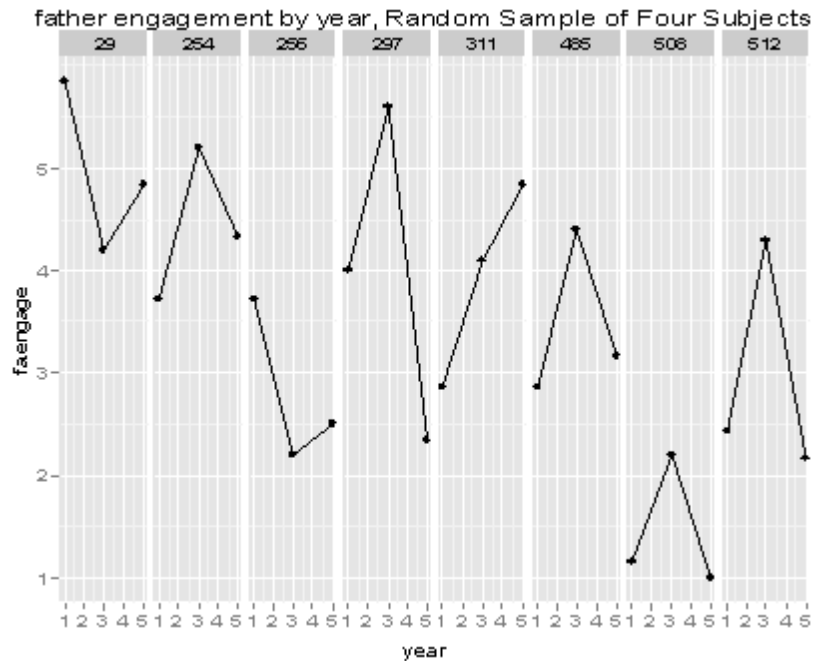


Figure 4. Facet graph of individual change curves (facet by subject) from a random sample

numbers of subjects that decrease over time than increase. In the plot of superimposed individual growth curves (Figure 3), there is individual variability in terms of scatter about the vertical axis with one subject having an initial father engagement score a little more than 1, subjects having initial scores of 7, and other subjects distributed between them. There appears to be no subjects who are outliers.

### Results

Table 1 shows coefficients of ethnicity and extended family relationship on unmarried resident father engagement with young children. In model 1 (unconditional model), both the intercept and slope effects was significant. The intercept coefficient of father engagement at child age 1 was 4.91 ( $p < .001$ ), and the slope coefficient of father engagement between child age 1 and 5 was  $-0.25$  ( $p < .001$ ). Model 1 shows

that unmarried resident fathers' engagement with young children significantly decreases from child age one to five. In model 2 (conditional model), fathers' ethnicity was included to examine the effect of ethnic types on unmarried resident fathers' engagement with young children in the longitudinal context. White fathers were used as a reference group. The estimate for the ethnic group intercept effect was positive  $.36$  ( $p < .05$ ) meaning that the Black unmarried resident father group starts at a  $.36$  higher level than the white group in terms of their engagement with infants at age one. The Black unmarried resident father group also showed the negatively lower slope coefficient ( $-0.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ) than White fathers' slope coefficient. This result indicates that unmarried resident Black fathers' engagement between child age 1 and 5 tends to be consistently more decreased over time than unmarried resident White fathers' engagement.

In model 3 (conditional model), unmarried



Table 1  
*Coefficients of Ethnicity and Extended Family Relationship on Father Engagement with Children at Child Age 1 and Engagement Trajectory between Child Age 1 and 5 (N=292)*

	Model 1	Model 2		Model 3	
		Intercept ( $\pi_{0i}$ )	Slope ( $\pi_{1i}$ )	Intercept ( $\pi_{0i}$ )	Slope ( $\pi_{1i}$ )
Intercept	4.91*** (0.08)	4.69*** (0.13)		4.68*** (0.2)	
Slope	-0.25*** (0.02)		-0.18*** (0.03)		-0.24*** (0.05)
Ethnicity					
Black		0.36* (0.17)	-0.10* (0.04)	0.36** (0.17)	-0.11* (0.04)
Extended Family Relationship					
High				0.01 (0.21)	0.07 (0.05)
Random Effect					
Intercept Variance	0.81(0.9)	0.78(0.89)		0.78(0.89)	
Slope Variance	0.03(0.17)	0.03(0.16)		0.03(0.16)	
Residual	0.82(0.91)	0.82(0.91)		0.82(0.91)	

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

resident fathers' relationship levels with extended family members (high/low) were included to examine its mediating effect between father ethnicity and engagement in the longitudinal context. Low level's relationships with extended family members were used as the reference group. However, the estimate for the intercept effect of the extended family relationship on unmarried resident father engagement was close to zero meaning that the effect was negligible. The estimate for the slope effect of extended family relationship was positive .07 meaning that the slope for the high family relationship level group is higher than for the low family relationship level group and the change curves tend to diverge slightly over time. The inclusion of the extended family relationship also did not affect the estimates for the intercept and slope effects of ethnicity on father engagement so that

the complete mediation model should be ruled out.

Figure 5 shows growth curve graphs of unmarried resident father's engagement with young children by ethnicity and extended family relationship. These growth curve graphs which were depicted using R's *ggplot2* package exhibit the different trajectories of unmarried resident fathers' groups by ethnicity and extended family relationship levels. Results suggest that Black unmarried resident fathers exhibit more engagement with their infants at age one than their White counterparts do, but the initial difference reverses by age five as a result of decreasing engagement among Black fathers over time and comparatively increasing engagement among Whites. At child age five, the White unmarried resident father group is predicted to have a higher level of father

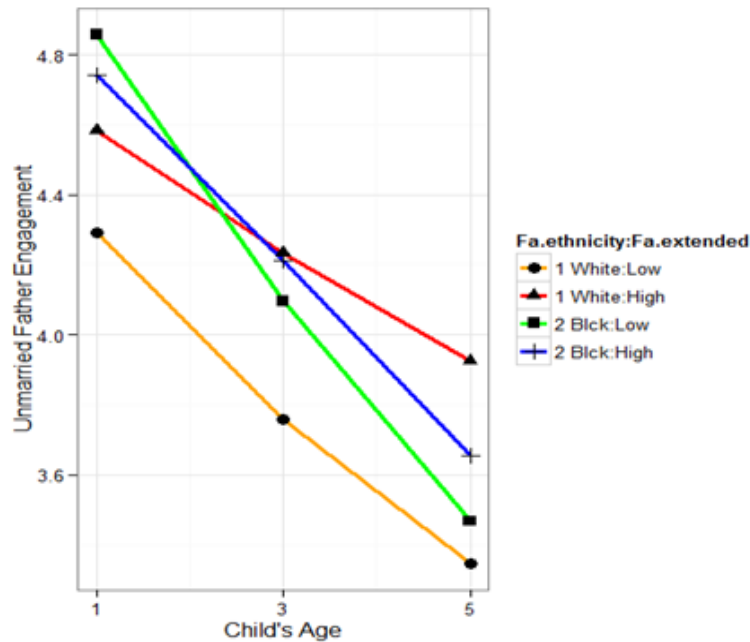


Figure 5. Growth curve graphs of unmarried resident father's engagement with young children by ethnicity and extended family relationship

engagement than that of the Black father group. Results also suggest that Black unmarried resident fathers with high relationship level with extended family members exhibit less engagement with their infants than Black fathers with low relationship level, but the initial difference reverses by age five as a result of decreasing engagement among Black fathers with low relationship level over time and comparatively increasing engagement among Black fathers with high relationship level. Meanwhile, the initial difference of engagement between White fathers with a high relationship level with extended family and White fathers with a low relationship level consistently endured over time without reversing by age five.

Regarding the variance components of the models, the estimated variance of the random intercepts was .78, and the estimated variance of the random slopes was .03. The random intercept variance reflects the metric of father engagement at child age 1, and the random slope variance

reflects the metric of the linear change in father engagement between age 1 to 5. The value in the residual row, .82, indicates the estimated variance of the random error. The estimated correlation was -.32. The negative correlation indicates that those with higher intercepts tend to have lower slopes.

## Discussion

This study examined the role of father ethnicity and extended family relationship in the longitudinal patterns of unmarried resident fathers' engagement with young children, using a panel data, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). According to Hohmann-Marriott (2011), the reason of child-centeredness of unmarried fathers at early child age is that they may need to demonstrate their commitment to the relationship with the child's mother by being more engaged with infants.

They also pointed out that unmarried couples may hold more flexible views of parental roles, thus allowing fathers to participate in childrearing to a greater degree. Although the results show a high level of father engagement at child age one, unmarried resident fathers' child-centeredness at the early child age appears to decrease over time, especially between ages one and five, probably along with fathers' decreasing commitment to the relationship with the child's mother.

Results in this study suggested that Black unmarried resident fathers exhibited more engagement with their infants at age one than their White counterparts did, but the initial difference reversed by age five as a result of decreasing engagement among Black fathers over time and comparatively increasing engagement among Whites. This finding confirmed previous research and theoretical assumptions on father engagement. Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1999) and Jain, Belsky, and Crnic (1996) found that the majority of African American fathers exhibited high levels of engagement with young children, especially at the time of children's birth, during infancy, while the White fathers' engagement was substantially low especially in infant caregiving. However, nearly 40% of African American fathers showed instability in their engagement with their children over a time period of 3 years, significantly decreasing their level of father engagement during the period between the child's birth and preschool years.

Finally, this study examined to what extent extended family relationship of unmarried resident fathers acts as a mediator for ethnicity effects found in father engagement. Although Ryan et al. (2008) found that fathers' better relationships with extended family members were associated positively with father engagement across ethnicity over time, the present study did not support the mediating role of the extended family relationship between father ethnicity and engagement over time.

The current study provides important findings about the nature of unmarried resident fathers and variations in their engagement with young

children over time by ethnicity. Black fathers who remained unmarried were more willing to engage in child's life during early years compared to White fathers, but their engagement level sharply declined over time. Public policies and intervention strategies need to focus on supporting Black unmarried resident fathers to maintain their initial level of engagement with young children over time. Given the evidence from past research that enhancing the quality of the mother-father relationship may improve later father engagement quality (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2009), future research should also examine the extent to which unmarried resident fathers' relationship quality with their child's mothers affect father engagement change over time.

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