

PRENATAL PREDICTORS OF MATERNAL GATEKEEPING AMONG UNMARRIED,  
BLACK PARENTS OF INFANTS

by

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(Under the Direction of Dr. Geoffrey Brown)

ABSTRACT

Maternal gatekeeping research has documented consequences for paternal parenting and father-child relationship quality. This study examined the prenatal predictors of maternal gatekeeping behaviors among unmarried, Black couples with a 3–6-month-old baby. Prenatal survey data was collected from both mothers and father on 1) parental expectations for father involvement, 2) co-parenting and inter-parental relationship quality, 3) gender role ideology, and 4) economic distress. Pregnancy intention (planned vs. unplanned) was also considered as a moderator. Fathers reported on mothers' inhibitory and facilitative maternal gatekeeping behaviors at the post-birth assessment. Bivariate correlations and hierarchical regression analyses indicated that fathers' higher prenatal expectations for father involvement were related to less inhibitory gatekeeping, whereas mothers' higher prenatal expectations for father involvement were related to greater inhibitory gatekeeping. For facilitative gatekeeping, only fathers' greater economic distress was associated with higher levels of maternal facilitation. Associations were not moderated by planned vs. unplanned pregnancy status.

INDEX WORDS: Maternal gatekeeping, Prenatal factors, Predictors, Father involvement, Childrearing, Maternal behaviors, Parental expectations

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Research from a family systems perspective (e.g., Minuchin, 1985) has long examined different patterns of inter-parental relationship quality, including satisfaction, conflict, and coparenting dynamics. Beginning in the 1990s, Allen and Hawkins (1999) coined the term “maternal gatekeeping” to characterize the extent to which mothers regulate fathers’ involvement with their children, including childcare, play, and other childrearing activities. Although gatekeeping initially referred to inhibitory behaviors that restrict paternal involvement (i.e., “closing the gate”), more recent conceptualizations recognize that many mothers also engage in facilitative behaviors (i.e., “opening the gate”) that can encourage and promote fathers’ involvement with young children (e.g., Pulhman & Pasley, 2013). Thus, maternal gatekeeping of both types may play a key role in shaping fathers’ positive involvement with children in the early years, and the attendant benefits of positive involvement for children’s downstream development (e.g., Sarkadi et al., 2008).

Although numerous studies on the predictors of maternal gatekeeping exist, few consider prenatal factors associated with gatekeeping. Moreover, the vast majority of research on maternal gatekeeping has been conducted with middle class, White, and married parents (Blair & Pisco, 2019; Sano et.al, 2008). Given wide cultural variation in gender role ideology, family structure, and family functioning, there is a critical need to consider gatekeeping in other cultural and sociodemographic contexts (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). In the present study, we examine the prenatal predictors of both facilitative and inhibitory maternal gatekeeping during infancy among

an under-represented population of unmarried, Black parents. Though largely neglected in the empirical literature on parenting, emerging evidence suggests that unmarried, Black fathers are involved in myriad ways with young children (e.g., Jones & Mosher, 2013) and their involvement fosters positive developmental outcomes for children beginning in infancy (e.g., Roopnarine & Hossain, 2013). As such, elucidating the various prenatal factors that predict maternal gatekeeping is a critical step toward better understanding the development of the paternal role in this population. The current exploratory study examined the links between pre-birth factors, including parental expectations for father involvement and coparenting, inter-parental relationship quality, gender role ideology, financial distress, and both inhibitory and facilitative maternal gatekeeping behavior in early infancy. The potential moderating role of pregnancy intention (i.e., planned vs. unplanned pregnancy) on the associations between pre-birth predictors and maternal gatekeeping was also considered.

### **Maternal Gatekeeping among Unmarried, Black Parents**

Allen and Hawkins (1999) defined maternal gatekeeping as the set of beliefs and behaviors that may inhibit fathers' involvement with their children. Although not all mothers engage in gatekeeping, some women's desire to validate maternal identity may lead a subset of mothers to consciously or unconsciously impose barriers on men's interactions with their children, thus discouraging paternal involvement. Although this definition of *inhibitory gatekeeping* dominated the early literature on this topic, more recent conceptualizations also posit that many mothers' *facilitative gatekeeping* behaviors may actually promote father involvement by encouraging fathers to engage with their children in ways that they may otherwise not (e.g., Puhlman & Pasley, 2013). Both facilitative gatekeeping and inhibitory gatekeeping definitions assert that the mother has high amounts of control over paternal behavior

and the quality of the father-child relationship, allowing her to either promote or inhibit men's involvement in childrearing.

Some empirical literature has supported links between both forms of gatekeeping and fathers' parenting. For instance, inhibitory gatekeeping is related to a reduction in fathers' parenting quantity and quality (Altenburger et al., 2018; Fagan & Barnett, 2003), whereas facilitative gatekeeping is related to increased father involvement with childrearing (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2019). The effects of gatekeeping also appear to extend to coparenting and inter-parental relationship quality (Olsavsky et al., 2020; Stevenson et al., 2014) and positive developmental outcomes in socio-emotional domains (Wang et al., 2019). Given the potential benefits of facilitative gatekeeping and risks associated with inhibitory gatekeeping for paternal involvement, family dynamics, and child well-being, it is essential to better understand what factors predict gatekeeping behaviors. A limited body of prior research has examined predictors of maternal gatekeeping, identifying several factors associated with both inhibitory and facilitative gatekeeping. Although most of this work has focused on gatekeeping predictors in infancy and beyond, attitudes and contextual circumstances that affect gatekeeping may develop prior to the child's birth. Indeed, several studies have documented associations between pre-birth factors and post-birth gatekeeping in the first year (Cannon et al., 2008; Olsavsky et al., 2020; Zvara et al., 2013). By and large, these studies have focused predominantly on the predictive power of maternal pre-birth parenting beliefs (e.g., paternal self-efficacy, parenting perfectionism, beliefs about the paternal role) for maternal gatekeeping, with other socio-contextual variables and aspects of current relationship quality largely unknown.

Moreover, prior studies on prenatal predictors of gatekeeping have focused almost exclusively on samples that were White, middle-class, well-educated, and married. Contrary to

unfair and inaccurate stereotypes regarding their role in family life, most unmarried, Black fathers are highly motivated as parents and engage with their children in a variety of ways (e.g., Jones & Mosher, 2013). Further, their positive engagement in children's lives is associated with a host of beneficial outcomes for children and youth (e.g., Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Downer & Mendez, 2005). Still, data on the determinants of maternal gatekeeping behaviors that can either inhibit or promote unmarried, Black fathers' engagement with their infants is limited.

Several studies have looked at gatekeeping processes using the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being data set, a racially and ethnically diverse sample of unmarried parents. These results suggest associations between facilitative gatekeeping and increased fathers' positive engagement (e.g., Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Lee & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2023). Nonetheless, no research to date has considered *predictors* of maternal gatekeeping exclusively among unmarried, Black parents. Moreover, given that for Black men in particular the process of becoming a parent often begins in the prenatal period (e.g., Fagan et al. 2023; Thomas et al., 2023), there is a critical need to better elucidate pre-birth factors associated with maternal gatekeeping in this population. The present study was designed to meet these needs. In the sections below, previous literature is reviewed on several potential predictors of maternal gatekeeping.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study was motivated and informed by a family systems theoretical perspective. Minuchin (1985) outlines the principles of family systems theory by emphasizing that families are systems “organized as a whole”, with elements of each system being interconnected with one another. Each relationship within a family is fundamentally connected to the others, and when one individual or relationship undergoes change, then the rest of the family system may feel the effects as well. By its very nature, the construct of maternal gatekeeping is a

family systems-oriented variable, lying at the intersection of the parent-child and inter-parental family sub-systems. For instance, conceptualizations of maternal gatekeeping posit that intrapersonal attitudes and cognitions play a key role in shaping mothers' behaviors toward fathers, which in turn affects both the inter-parental relationship and the relationship between the father and child (e.g., Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2019).

This paper also explores potential predictors of gatekeeping behavior through this systemic lens by selecting predictors that encompass numerous individuals and sub-systems within the family. Consistent with a family systems perspective, these predictors will include individual psychological characteristics (e.g., attitudes toward gender roles), inter-parental relationship dynamics (e.g., marital quality), and aspects of triadic family functioning that include the child and both parents (e.g., coparenting). Moreover, we will consider both mothers' and fathers' attitudes toward – and expectations for – parental roles separately to further elucidate the reciprocal and interrelated connections between gatekeeping and all other elements of the family system.

Finally, family systems theory emphasizes the importance of studying change in families across critical points of transition (e.g., Cox & Paley, 1997). The transition to a new child represents a key inflection point for many families, in which family roles and expectations are re-organized to meet changing demands. The focus of this study on prenatal predictors helps to better elucidate pre-existing individual and family characteristics prior to the birth of a child that may ease this transition and set the stage for early relational health among multiple family sub-systems upon the baby's arrival.

## *Parenting Expectations*

Prior evidence suggests that gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes develop in the context of parents' expectations for each parent's role. Given the strong link between paternal identity and paternal behavior (e.g., Adamsons & Pasley, 2016), men who expect to be engaged with children are likely to contribute in ways (both pre- and post-birth) that lead to less inhibitory and more facilitative gatekeeping (e.g. Fagan & Cherson, 2017). Thus, it is expected that when fathers anticipate being highly involved in childcare it may reflect greater levels of parenting self-efficacy and investment in the paternal role, resulting in lower levels of inhibitory gatekeeping and higher levels of facilitative gatekeeping from mothers (e.g., McBride et al., 2005; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015).

For mothers, however, the link between prenatal expectations for fathers' parenting and gatekeeping may be more complex. In particular, mothers' relatively scripted attitudes toward their engagement with infants (relative to fathers) can often result in a set of expectations toward their partners' desire/ability to parent as well as the father's parenting skills (Schoppe-Sullivan et.al, 2015). For instance, when mothers' expectations for the amount of involvement a father should have in their child's life are met, they are less likely to engage in inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors (Kulik & Tsoref, 2010). On the contrary, when mothers set increasingly high standards for father involvement and parenting skills, they may be more likely to engage in "gate-closing" behaviors to tightly regulate men's involvement or facilitative behaviors to help meet these expectations (Schoppe-Sullivan et.al, 2015).

In addition to expectations for fathers' quantitative involvement with their infants, mothers' perceptions of paternal competence may also impact their tendency to practice gatekeeping behaviors. Past research has indicated that the less competent or capable a father is

believed to be by the mother, the more inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors that will be practiced (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Many mothers feel that, despite wanting to be involved, the fathers of their children simply do not understand the complexities of child rearing and fall short in their ability to provide the proper care (Sano et.al, 2008). Although this pattern has been documented among married couples, it could be especially true among unmarried parents, many of whom may not yet be in long-term committed relationships with one another. Among parents for whom relationship status is transient or still solidifying there may be an even stronger desire to limit or regulate fathers' involvement when paternal competence is perceived to be low or unknown by the mother, given the negative consequences of increasing involvement among men engaging in maladaptive parenting (e.g., Zvara et al., 2016).

### ***Coparenting and Inter-Parental Relationship Quality***

Supportiveness in the coparenting partnership can also be an important indicator of the quality of a relationship between parents, and the amount of perceived support that a mother and father report is useful in understanding the dynamics of their relationship (Carlson et al., 2004). Extant literature suggests that supportive coparenting – the extent to which mothers and fathers support and cooperate with one another around parenting-related issues – is linked to maternal gatekeeping. For example, higher levels of supportiveness within the co-parenting relationship may lead mothers to practice more facilitative gate-opening and encouragement, which in turn is linked to an increase in competent fathering behavior (Schoppe-Sullivan et.al, 2008). Similarly, Olsavsky et al. (2020) documented associations between coparenting closeness and both greater levels of facilitative gatekeeping and lower levels of inhibitory gatekeeping. Given conceptual similarity between the gatekeeping and coparenting constructs (Altenburger, 2023), it stands to reason that these variables would be related to one another. However, the extent to which

expectations for the coparenting relationship *before the birth of a child* might affect gatekeeping has not been studied.

Aspects of the inter-parental relationship beyond coparenting (e.g., partner satisfaction, conflict) may also play a role in shaping gatekeeping attitudes and behaviors. For instance, Stevenson et al. (2014) found that marital problems were longitudinally linked to mothers' more inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors. Similarly, Thomas et al. (2022) found that instability in marital relationships was associated with more gate-closing from mothers. Given the importance of a close and cohesive couple relationship prior to the birth of a child for family functioning post-birth (e.g., Le et al., 2016), we might also expect inter-parental relationship quality to be associated with more facilitative and less inhibitory gatekeeping.

As noted, most work on relational predictors of maternal gatekeeping has been conducted with married and predominantly White samples. To the extent that gatekeeping has been considered in unmarried and racial minority samples, prior studies have shown that early facilitative and inhibitory gatekeeping is linked to greater and less paternal engagement, respectively (e.g., Fagan & Cherson, 2017). What predicts maternal gatekeeping among unmarried, Black parents remains unknown. Given the importance of prenatal and early post-natal inter-parental relationship quality and supportive coparenting among unmarried, Black parents (e.g., Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; McHale et al., 2022), there are reasons to believe that these variables may also be linked to more facilitative and less inhibitory gatekeeping in this population. The present study will be the first to examine these associations within this socio-cultural context.

### ***Gender Role Ideology***

Prior work suggests that mothers who have a strong maternal identity are more likely to engage in inhibitory gatekeeping attitudes and behaviors (Gaunt, 2008). Specifically, mothers who a) have a stronger, stereotypically feminine gender orientation, and b) feel that their identity as a mother is extremely central to their identity as a whole, are more likely to believe that family work is the “sole domain” of the mother and subsequently hold gatekeeping attitudes that restrict or limit paternal involvement. Similarly, when mothers have more “traditional” views of the paternal role -- such as the father being the breadwinner, and the mother being the caregiver -- inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors are more likely to occur (Cannon et.al, 2008). Furthermore, mothers’ beliefs about the roles fathers should have in childrearing can mitigate the relationship between fathers’ own perceptions of involvement and their actual involvement with their children (McBride et al., 2005). Unmarried fathers may enact their parenting role in diverse ways relative to married fathers (e.g., Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). Moreover, Black parents tend to have less traditional, gender-stereotyped views of family roles and responsibilities relative to White parents (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1995; Brown, Halberstadt, & Craig, 2015). As such, it is critical to consider the extent to which associations between maternal gender role ideology and gatekeeping behaviors may (or may not) hold in our population of unmarried, Black parents.

### ***Economic Distress***

Although the contributions of fathers go well beyond the financial domain, the provision of financial support remains an important aspect of paternal identity for some fathers, including many unmarried, Black men (e.g., Roy, 2006). For mothers, the financial contribution that fathers are able and willing to make to their children may play a role in limiting or granting access to children (e.g., Walper et al., 2020). Despite this apparent connection between paternal

financial contributions and gatekeeping, Sano et al. (2008) found that many mothers still desire the father to be involved with their child even when they were not able to contribute financially. Additionally, amongst low-income families, mothers actively encourage and ask the father of their children to be involved with childcare regardless of their financial contributions (Fagan & Cherson, 2017).

Although the majority of the literature on fathers' finances focuses on their financial contributions to their children and the child's mother, the financial circumstances faced by low socioeconomic status individuals can also serve as a source of *psychological stress* that can spillover into family dynamics for Black families (e.g., McLoyd et al., 1990). As such, particularly among young adults for whom work arrangements and vocational engagement are often transient, subjective measures of financial distress may be more salient than objective measures of income or other aspects of socioeconomic status (e.g., Dunst & Leet, 1987). As such, in the present study we consider the potential effects of both mothers' and fathers' subjective economic distress. Despite its potential to impact parenting attitudes and cognitions (e.g., Puff & Rank, 2014) as well as inter-parental relationship functioning (e.g., Wheeler et al., 2019) the extent to which fathers' financial distress may affect maternal gatekeeping remains an exploratory question.

### ***Unplanned vs Planned Pregnancies as a Moderator***

Compared to couples who experience a pregnancy as a planned event, mothers who experience an unplanned pregnancy have a higher risk of psychological stress, particularly if they are feeling unhappy or ambivalent about the pregnancy, and if they report low relationship quality with the child's father (Barton et.al, 2017). Similarly, fathers of children resulting from unplanned pregnancies also report higher levels of stress than fathers of children from planned

pregnancies (Clinton et al., 1993). However, there is also some evidence that suggests mothers and fathers who have a child resulting from an unplanned pregnancy are more well-adjusted than couples who plan their pregnancy (Bouchard et.al, 2006). For some couples, the elevated anxiety associated with an unplanned pregnancy can be an opportunity for increased communication and closeness that may allow them to function better together after the child is born (Bouchard et.al, 2006). Due to these contradictory findings, it is unclear if an unplanned pregnancy may be linked directly to maternal gatekeeping behaviors.

One possibility is that the increased stress of an unplanned pregnancy may exacerbate the effect of individual and family risk factors on inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors (Barton et.al, 2017; Clinton et.al, 1993). When unplanned pregnancies occur outside the confines of traditional marriage, mothers may be less certain about the fathers' capacities for father involvement or to provide adequate care, and less confident in the fathers' abilities to meet the needs of the child under stressful circumstances. These couples may also on average be less committed to one another and more likely to be facing economic hardship, both of which can exacerbate stress within the family. Taken together, unplanned pregnancies may amplify risk factors for greater inhibitory and less facilitative maternal gatekeeping, such that associations between prenatal characteristics and gatekeeping will be stronger in these families. In contrast, when mothers experience a planned pregnancy, they may have a more well-defined set of expectations for fathers owing to the fact that they have intentionally moved forward with a plan for family-building. This intentionality could also reflect a pre-existing confidence in the fathers' parenting capacity, such gatekeeping is less strongly related to prenatal factors among mothers whose pregnancies were planned. Nonetheless, no empirical data exists considering pregnancy intention as a moderator of predictors of maternal gatekeeping The current study will consider

this question and test for differential associations among all predictor variables and gatekeeping behaviors as a function of whether pregnancies were planned or unplanned.

### **The Current Study**

In sum, the current study extends prior literature by examining the prenatal predictors of both inhibitory and facilitative maternal gatekeeping in an under-represented sample of unmarried, Black parents of infants. Specifically, we examine the joint and unique effects of pre-birth including a) parenting expectations, b) inter-parental relationship quality and expectations for coparenting, c) gender role ideology, and d) paternal financial distress. Further, we explored pregnancy intention as a moderator for the effects of all previously listed predictor variables on both aspects of maternal gatekeeping in the first 6 months.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODS AND MEASURES

#### **Methods**

##### ***Sample***

Data from the PACT (Parents and Children Together) Project at the University of Georgia were used in this study. Participants consisted of 125 unmarried couples (mother and father) who identified as African American or Black. These couples were expecting a new child together and resided predominantly in low-resource rural communities in Georgia. At baseline (Wave 1), the mean age of expectant fathers and mothers was 28 years old ( $SD = 6.85$ ) and 26 years old ( $SD = 6.85$ ), respectively. The median income of fathers at the baseline was \$1600 per month and the mean was \$1800 per month ( $SD = \$1038$ ). The majority of expectant fathers (81.75%) and expectant mothers (87.8%) reported being romantically involved with their expectant coparent at the baseline on a steady basis. Descriptive statistics of the sample are included in Table 1.

##### **Procedures**

For Wave 1 (pre-birth), couples were recruited when mothers were in their second or third trimester of pregnancy. All prenatal predictors were measured in Wave 1 (parenting expectations, inter-parental relationship quality and expectations for coparenting, gender role ideology, and paternal financial distress). For Wave 2 (post-birth), parents were visited again when their children were approximately 3-6 months old. Maternal gatekeeping was measured in Wave 2 as reported by fathers. The data for this study was obtained through a series of

questionnaires administered at each wave by community research assistants. Maternal gatekeeping was reported by fathers, and predictor variables were reported by mother, father, or both parents depending on the construct being assessed.

## **Measures**

### *Maternal Gatekeeping.*

Maternal gatekeeping was assessed using an adapted version of “The Parental Regulation Inventory”, created by Van Egeren (2000), and condensed into a shorter version by Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2015). This shorter six-item version asked fathers to indicate the extent to which they observed certain behaviors from their partner (the mother) on a five-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (all the time) (see Appendix A). The questionnaire includes questions like “How often does she (the mother) criticize you as a parent?” and “How often does she encourage you to spend time with your baby?” Two sub-scales of gatekeeping included: 1) inhibitory gatekeeping, otherwise referred to as “gate closing”, and 2) facilitative gatekeeping, otherwise referred to as “gate opening”. Inhibitory gatekeeping was calculated by summing three items assessing gate closing behaviors (i.e., criticism) and facilitative gatekeeping was calculated by summing three items indicative of gate opening behavior (i.e., encouragement). The Cronbach’s alpha for the inhibitory scale was .657; the Cronbach’s alpha for the facilitation scale was .742.

### *Parenting Expectations (Father Involvement and Co-parenting Expectations)*

A prenatal expectations for father involvement scale was created for the current study and administered to both parents. The questionnaire consisted of seven items assessing the extent to which they believed the father would be involved (see Appendix B). Fathers and mothers were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement on a five-point Likert type

scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). *Expectations for father involvement* were calculated by summing the response scores for the first three statements in the questionnaire (e.g., “I think that I/my baby’s father will be very involved in my child’s life”). The Cronbach’s alpha for the involvement expectations was .975 for fathers, and .947 for mothers. *Expectations for co-parenting* were calculated by summing the response scores for the latter 4 items of the questionnaire (e.g., “I think that my child’s mother/father and I will make a good parenting team”). The Cronbach’s alpha for the co-parenting expectations scale was .966 for fathers and .890 for mothers.

#### *Inter-Parental Relationship Quality.*

A five-item scale adopted from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (Carlson et al., 2004) was used to evaluate the level of support in the relationship between the two parents. Mothers were asked to indicate how often their partner exhibited certain supportive behaviors on a three-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 3 (often) (see Appendix C). Participants were asked questions like “How often does your child’s mother/father express love and affection for you?” and “How often does your child’s mother/father encourage you or help you with things?” A total score was calculated for inter-parental relationship quality by summing the five survey items. The Cronbach’s alpha for the relationship quality scale for mothers was .873.

#### *Gender Role Ideology.*

An adapted version of the Role of the Father Questionnaire (ROFQ) was completed by both parents to measure parental attitudes toward gender roles. The modified ROFQ (Palkovitz, 1984) is a 14-item scale designed to determine the extent to which a parent believes the fathers’ role is important in child development (see Appendix D). The questionnaire included statements

like “Fathers play a central role in a child's development” and “Mothers are naturally better caregivers than fathers are”. Both mothers (alpha = .740) and fathers (alpha = .832) indicated a level of agreement or disagreement along a 5-point scale for each item (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree). Responses for both mothers and fathers were coded such that higher total scores on this measure are reflective of non-traditional gender role attitudes that fathers are capable of and should demonstrate involvement with their children.

#### *Economic Distress.*

This variable was examined using the Economic Distress Inventory (Dunst & Leet, 1987) to evaluate subjective economic well-being (see Appendix E). Fathers and mothers were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with seven statements (e.g., “I have enough money to afford the kind of home I need”) on a four-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). A total score was calculated for each participant by summing their responses to each of the seven statements. The Cronbach’s alpha for the co-parenting expectations scale was .910 for fathers and .899 for mothers. Only fathers’ responses were used to measure the variable for paternal economic distress.

#### *Pregnancy Intention (Planned vs Unplanned).*

Mothers were asked “Was this a planned pregnancy?” and indicated “yes” or “no”. If mothers responded “no”, their response was recorded as a zero; if their answer was “yes”, their response was recorded as a one.

### **Analysis Plan**

Zero-order correlations among study variables were examined to determine bivariate associations between all continuous predictor variables and both maternal gatekeeping dependent variables (facilitative and inhibitory gatekeeping). Because pregnancy intention is a dichotomous

variable, independent samples t-test was used to test for mean-level differences in both forms of gatekeeping for couples with planned vs. unplanned pregnancies. Two separate hierarchical regression analyses were then conducted with each aspect of gatekeeping as dependent variables. Variables that were significantly correlated with each outcome were entered as a single block (with pregnancy intentions dummy-coded) in each regression model to determine the unique contributions of each prenatal predictor for both dimensions of maternal gatekeeping. Interaction terms between pregnancy intention and all predictor variables were added to the second step of each regression equation to test for moderating effects of planned vs. unplanned pregnancy status.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

Means and Standard Deviations for all study variables are presented in Table 2. Bivariate correlations are presented among all continuous study variables in Table 3. There was a pattern of high intercorrelations among numerous predictor variables, including mothers' and fathers' expectations for father involvement and coparenting. Due to exceptionally high correlations within parents' expectations for father involvement and coparenting that exceeded  $r = .90$ , only the expectations for fathers' involvement (both mothers' and fathers' perceptions) were considered in subsequent analyses to reduce redundancy in results.

In general, fathers reported relatively few inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors and relatively high levels of maternal facilitative behaviors. Both mothers and fathers had high prenatal expectations for paternal involvement, and economic distress (for both mothers and fathers) was moderate, albeit with substantial variability in this sample. Paired samples t-tests comparing mothers' vs. fathers' scores on predictor variables indicated that mothers had less traditional gender role ideology as compared to fathers,  $t(120) = -2.74, p = .007$ .

Relatively few hypothesized prenatal predictors were related to maternal gatekeeping behaviors. However, there was a negative association between fathers' prenatal expectations for their own involvement and inhibitory gatekeeping, suggesting that mothers engaged in less inhibitory gatekeeping when fathers expected to be more involved with their children. Although the association was only marginally significant, there was a *positive* trend for mothers' expectations of father involvement such that mothers who expected fathers to be more involved

with children exhibited marginally more inhibitory gatekeeping. Only fathers' economic distress was related to facilitative gatekeeping, such that mothers engaged in more facilitative gatekeeping when fathers were economically distressed. No other predictor variables were significantly related to facilitative gatekeeping.

Main effects regression analyses proceeded according to the analytic plan outlined previously. As such, mothers' and fathers' expectations for father involvement were entered on a single block of a hierarchical linear regression predicting inhibitory gatekeeping (see Table 4). The overall model with both variables explained 10% of the variance in inhibitory gatekeeping. Notably, both predictors remained significant when controlling for the other parent's perceptions, but in opposite directions. In particular, and consistent with bivariate associations, mothers' expectations for higher prenatal father involvement were related to less inhibitory gatekeeping whereas fathers' expectations prenatally were associated with greater inhibitory gatekeeping. No further regression analyses were ran for facilitative gatekeeping due to the fact that only one significant correlation was found during the initial correlational analysis.

Additional exploratory analyses considered differences in mean levels of gatekeeping for couples who had planned vs. unplanned pregnancies, as well as variation in patterns of association between variables as a function of pregnancy intention. In terms of mean-level group differences, mothers whose pregnancies were planned reported significantly higher expectations for paternal involvement,  $t(123) = 2.718, p = .008$  and significantly lower levels of economic distress,  $t(123) = -3.423, p < .001$  relative to those whose pregnancies were unplanned. Further analyses compared the magnitude of bivariate correlations between predictor variables and both aspects of gatekeeping when pregnancies were planned vs. unplanned. A pattern of mostly similar correlations emerged across the two groups, with the exception of fathers' expectations

for paternal involvement prenatally. Specifically, fathers' expectations for greater involvement were strongly negatively related to inhibitory gatekeeping only when pregnancies were planned ( $r = -.49, p < .05$ ) but unrelated to gatekeeping when pregnancies were unplanned ( $r = .01, n.s.$ ). Results suggest that associations between expectations for father involvement and inhibitory gatekeeping observed in the overall sample were driven largely by the sub-group of parents who reported planned pregnancies.

To further explicate these findings, interaction terms between each predictor variable and pregnancy intention were added one at a time to the second block of the regression equation predicting inhibitory gatekeeping. However, all interaction terms -- including the pregnancy intention x parental expectations for father involvement -- failed to reach statistical significance. The lack of evidence for formal moderation may in part be a product of the modest cell size for couples that reported having planned pregnancies ( $n = 26$ ).

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

Results from the present study shed light on the correlates of maternal gatekeeping among an underrepresented population of unmarried, Black parents. Primary findings highlight the potentially important role of prenatal expectations for fathering in the development of inhibitory gatekeeping. Further, mothers' and fathers' prenatal expectations for parental involvement uniquely predicted inhibitory gatekeeping over and above the other parent's perceptions and in opposite directions. Paternal economic distress was the only predictor variable correlated with facilitative gatekeeping, with mothers engaging in more facilitation when paternal economic distress was high. Relatively few differences emerged in planned vs. unplanned pregnancies, though preliminary data point to potentially stronger links between prenatal expectations and gatekeeping in planned vs. unplanned pregnancies.

#### **Associations between Prenatal Predictors and Maternal Gatekeeping**

In bivariate analyses, the strongest predictor of inhibitory gatekeeping was fathers' expectations for their own involvement, such that inhibitory gatekeeping was lower when fathers had higher prenatal expectations for their own involvement with the child. There are a few possible explanations for this association. First, when fathers have higher expectations for their own levels of involvement in childrearing, this may reflect a stronger commitment to the parenting role that is likely evident to the mother. Mothers who have more confidence in the fathers' desire and willingness to engage in early caregiving are less likely to direct critical or inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors toward them. Indeed, some prior studies suggest that inhibitory

gatekeeping decreases when paternal identity (i.e., fathers' investments in and commitments to their parenting role) is strong (e.g., McBride et al., 2005; Adamsons, 2010). Moreover, when fathers expect to be involved, they may also already be engaging in activities during the prenatal period that reflect their desire to remain involved after the birth of the child, resulting in fewer gate-closing attempts from mothers. Prior research has documented the long reach of prenatal involvement and positive prenatal attitudes toward parenting among unmarried fathers for post-birth involvement (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2008; Fagan et al., 2023). Current study results suggest the possibility that reductions in maternal inhibitory gatekeeping may also be an outcome of unmarried fathers' prenatal investments in the parenting role.

Although mothers' expectations for father involvement were only marginally associated with inhibitory gatekeeping in bivariate correlations, results of regression analyses indicated that both mothers' and fathers' expectations accounted for unique portions of the variance in inhibitory gatekeeping. Strikingly, maternal and paternal expectations predicted inhibitory gatekeeping in opposite directions. In contrast to fathers' expectations, mothers' greater expectations for father involvement pre-birth were linked to more inhibitory gatekeeping. It seems likely that when mothers have high expectations for father involvement, they may exert higher amounts of control over how the father is involved, which could be exhibited through increasingly critical or inhibitory behaviors directed toward fathers. For example, mothers may criticize fathers when they are involved in ways that are not what the mother desires or expects. In doing so, mothers may be able to control where, how, and to what extent the father is involved. As such, high expectations for fathering could increase some mothers' desire for control over the way fathers interact with their children, for the purposes of pushing fathers to meet their expectations and fulfill their role as a parent (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015).

For facilitative gatekeeping, the only significant prenatal predictor was fathers' economic distress. Specifically, and somewhat counter to expectations, mothers engaged in more facilitative gatekeeping when fathers reported higher levels of economic distress. Although this finding is somewhat unexpected, it does suggest that many mothers were open to facilitating fathers' involvement with their children even if they were potentially unable to make substantial financial contributions, which is the likely case if fathers reported higher levels of economic distress. This idea is further supported by previous research on mothers in low-income areas of the United States showing that, regardless of financial situation, many mothers still want low socioeconomic fathers to be involved in childrearing and will engage in facilitative gatekeeping behaviors to encourage and promote their involvement in other areas of childrearing (Sano et.al, 2008; Fagan & Cherson, 2017). Despite the centrality of economic provision in the identity of many unmarried, Black fathers (e.g., Roy, 2005), results indicate that some mothers may actually encourage father involvement *more* when they cannot contribute financially.

### **Comparisons for Planned vs. Unplanned Pregnancies**

Comparisons among couples who reported having planned vs. unplanned pregnancies revealed relatively few differences in patterns of associations between these groups on most study variables. However, the negative association between paternal expectations for father involvement and inhibitory gatekeeping was substantially stronger when pregnancies were planned. When mothers and fathers plan a pregnancy, stress levels tend to be lower in the perinatal period likely due to increased commitment and preparation for pregnancy, childbirth, and post-birth adjustment (e.g., Barton et.al, 2017; Clinton et.al, 1993). Furthermore, when mothers and fathers are committed to having a child together, mothers may have more trust in the fathers' commitment to the paternal role. As such, they may be likely to reduce inhibitory

gatekeeping behaviors so that fathers are free to act on their investment in the parenting role. In contrast, when pregnancies are unplanned, mothers who engage in inhibitory gatekeeping may continue to do so regardless of fathers' intentions or expectations for their own involvement. Notably, formal tests of moderation in regression analyses did not reveal significant interaction effects. This may be due to the relatively small group of couples whose pregnancies were planned, and limitations of statistical power. Nonetheless, future work with other populations of parents that allow for comparisons between families with planned vs. unplanned pregnancies may be warranted.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite numerous study strengths, including pre-birth and post-birth assessments with an underrepresented population of parents, this study has a number of potential limitations. First, all data used in this study were self-reported responses by mothers and fathers. Data are subject to potential social desirability bias, and not necessarily reflective of all actual gatekeeping behaviors that could be occurring within the family unit. Study findings are also subject to shared method variance owing to many variables coming from the same reporter. Observational assessments of facilitative and inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors are suggested to examine, in real-time and across ecologically valid settings, how certain gatekeeping behaviors might be exhibited within couple and family dynamics. Second, the sample size potentially limits statistical power to detect significant findings. Some expected associations between prenatal factors and gatekeeping did not emerge. Future research with larger samples and greater statistical power may yield different results. Third, this study only included two timepoints of data: pre-birth and post-birth, which makes it difficult to track the full developmental course of gatekeeping over time. The addition of more timepoints could further elucidate developmental

trajectories of gatekeeping (and its correlates) and further establish direction of causality among study variables. Lastly, this study was conducted using a specific sample of unmarried, black parents expecting a child, so it should be emphasized that these findings are not necessarily generalizable to the broader population. Future studies could attempt to replicate these results with other samples that differ in socio-demographic characteristics.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Results from the present study speak to the importance of prenatal expectations for paternal involvement as important determinants of maternal gatekeeping. As couples progress and move towards starting a family, it is important that they understand and communicate about their attitudes toward and expectations for the shifting role dynamics that often accompany the birth of a child. In particular, many parents may benefit from beginning to prepare for childrearing by having conversations about their expectations for the father's role in early childrearing, their attitudes towards motherhood/fatherhood, and a clearer understanding of each other's economic situations. To assist with this, practitioners and clinicians can design and implement interventions and preventive interventions for couples expecting or planning to have a child that are specifically aimed at reducing potential risks for inhibitory maternal gatekeeping. These preventative interventions may focus on establishing common ground for couples regarding their parenting expectations and encouraging increased communication between expectant mothers and fathers to promote both father-child and inter-parental relationship functioning and involvement, as well as minimize potential inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors after the birth of the child.

Table 1

*PACT Wave 1 (Prenatal) Descriptive Demographic Statistics*

	<i>Father</i>		<i>Mother</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	27.99	6.85	26.02	5.02
Work Hours Per Week	38.1	11.52	33.18	9.42
Monthly Income	1973.26	1173.67	1763.76	1233.61
Economic Distress	15.64	4.47	14.9	4.32
	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Education</b>				
No H.S. Diploma	14	11.1%	11	8.8%
H.S. Diploma/GED	71	56.4%	46	36.8%
Vocational Certification	8	6.3%	11	8.8%
Some College	18	14.3%	33	26.4%
Associate's Degree	6	4.8%	10	8.0%
Bachelor's Degree	7	5.6%	13	10.4%
Advanced Degree	2	1.6%	1	0.8%
<b>Living Arrangement</b>				
Live with child's mother	83	65.9%	76	60.8%
<b>Relationship with Child's Mother</b>				
Steadily Romantically Involved	103	81.7%	110	88.0%
On and Off Relationship	11	8.7%	8	6.4%
Just Friends	7	5.6%	6	4.8%
Casual Sexual Relationship	5	4.0%	-	-
<b>Pregnancy Planned</b>				
Yes	99	79.2%	26	20.8%

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables*

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1. Inhibitory Gatekeeping	3.00	15.00	6.72	2.91
2. Facilitative Gatekeeping	3.00	15.00	12.02	2.82
3. Mother Expectations for Father Involvement	10.00	20.00	18.93	1.90
4. Father Expectations for Father Involvement	4.00	20.00	18.57	3.21
5. Inter-Parental Relationship Quality	5.00	15.00	13.27	2.12
6. Mother Economic Distress	7.00	28.00	14.90	4.33
7. Father Economic Distress	7.00	28.00	15.64	4.42
8. Mother Gender Role Ideology	27.00	45.00	38.13	5.15
9. Father Gender Role Ideology	18.00	45.00	36.70	4.13

Table 3

*Bivariate Correlations Among Study Variables*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Inhibitory Gatekeeping	--							
2. Facilitative Gatekeeping	-.06	--						
3. Mother Expectations for Father Involvement	.18+	-.08	--					
4. Father Expectations for Father Involvement	-.21*	.00	-.20*	--				
5. Inter-Parental Relationship Quality	.04	.12	.48**	.08	--			
6. Mother Economic Distress	-.10	.05	-.24**	.02	-.28**	--		
7. Father Economic Distress	.04	.25*	.02	-.16	-.01	.22	--	
8. Mother Gender Role Ideology	.15	-.17	.34**	.09	.30**	-.19	-.13	--
9. Father Gender Role Ideology	-.07	.07	.10	.12	-.08	.03	.01	.12

+ $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ;

Table 4

*Hierarchical Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Maternal Inhibitory Gatekeeping*

DV: Inhibitory Gatekeeping					
	$\beta$	b	S.E.	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>
<b>Predictors</b>					
Father Expectations for Father Involvement	-.15	-.26	.06	.01	-2.53
Mother Expectations for Father Involvement	.19	.22	.09	.04	2.12
$R^2$		.10			

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Maternal Gatekeeping Scale

##### **GATE: Gatekeeping**

Intro: These questions ask about the mother of your child, and how they interact with you as a parent. Please indicate how often the mother of your child does the following things. How often does she:

Response set:

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	All the time

- GATE1. Criticize you as a parent
- GATE2. Compliment you as a parent
- GATE3. Show or tell you that she is angry or irritated with you
- GATE4. Invite you to help with your baby
- GATE5. Tell you what she thinks you did wrong
- GATE6. Encourage you to spend time with your baby

## Appendix B

### Parenting Expectations Scale

#### **EXP: Expectations for Parenting**

##### Intro:

*Father:* We would like for you to think about what type of father you think you will be.

*Mother:* We would like for you to think about your child's father, and what type of father you think he will be. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of these statements.

##### Response set:

\_\_\_\_\_ 1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Strongly Disagree              Disagree              Neither Agree nor Disagree              Agree              Strongly agree

##### Items:

EXP 1. I think that I/my baby's father will be very involved in my child's life

EXP 2. I think that I/my baby's father will be a good dad

EXP 3. I think that I/my baby's father will spend a lot of time with my child

EXP 4. I think that I/my baby's father will work with my child's mother to raise our child

EXP 5. I think that my child's mother/father and I will make a good parenting team

EXP 6. I think that my child's mother/father and I will get along well after our child is born

EXP 7. I think that I/my baby's father will support my child financially



## Appendix D

### Gender Role Ideology Scale

#### **ROFQ: Role of the Father Questionnaire**

Intro: These next questions are about the father's role in child development. Please rate each item below to indicate the extent to which you agree with it.

Response set:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

Items:

- ROFQ 1. It is essential for the child's well-being that fathers spend time interacting and playing with their children.
- ROFQ 2. It is difficult for men to express tender and affectionate feelings toward babies.
- ROFQ 3. Fathers play a central role in child's development.
- ROFQ 4. The most important thing a man can do is invest time and energy into his family.
- ROFQ 5. A father should be as heavily involved in the care of a baby as the mother is.
- ROFQ 6. Mothers are naturally better caregivers than fathers are.
- ROFQ 7. Even when a baby is very young it is important for a father to set a good example for his baby.
- ROFQ 8. It is as important for a father to meet a baby's needs as it is for the mother to do so.
- ROFQ 9. The way a father treats his baby has important life-long effects on the child.

## Appendix E

### Economic Distress Inventory

Intro: These questions are about your economic well-being. Please rate each item below to indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement:

Response set:

(1) \_\_\_\_\_ (2) \_\_\_\_\_ (3) \_\_\_\_\_ (4)  
Strongly Disagree                      Disagree                      Agree                      Strongly Agree

**EDI1.** I have enough money to afford the kind of home I need.

**EDI2.** I have enough money to afford the kind of clothing I need.

**EDI3.** I have enough money to afford the kind of food I need.

**EDI4.** I have enough money to afford the kind of medical care I need.

**EDI5.** I have enough money to afford entertainment or to buy things for myself.

**EDI6.** I have enough money to pay my bills each month.

**EDI7.** I have enough money to pay for the kind of transportation I need.