

Family Instability and Mother-Child Relationship Quality

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Author Note

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Abstract

American families have undergone tremendous change in the past few decades, and many of today's children experience two or more family structures over the course of their childhood. Yet we know relatively little about the effects of these multiple transitions on children's lives. We focus on the effect of multiple family transitions on mother-child relationship quality. The mother-child relationship may be especially important for child well-being among children who experience multiple transitions because the mother is often the only constant parent figure, yet high levels of family instability may negatively influence the quality of the mother-child bond. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we investigate how the number and type of family structure transitions, including transitions involving cohabiting relationships, affect children's relationships with their resident mothers. We also examine whether child gender, age, or race moderate the effect of family instability on mother-child relationship quality.

Family Instability and Mother-Child Relationship Quality

The family structures in which American children grow up have diversified considerably in the last few decades. In 1970, 85 percent of all children under age 18 lived with two married biological parents. By 1996, that percentage had decreased to 68 percent, and in 2004 remained stable at about 68 percent (Child Trends Data Bank). Meanwhile, divorce, remarriage, nonmarital births, and cohabitation have become more common, and today's children experience a wide variety of family structures. For example, almost half of all children will live without their biological father at some point during childhood (Bianchi 1990), many as a consequence of increased rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing (Cherlin 1992). Estimates of the percentage of all American children who will spend some time in a cohabiting family, a highly unstable family structure, range from about two-fifths (Bumpass and Lu 2000) to one-fourth (Graefe and Lichter 1999).

There is an extensive body of literature linking current family structure status to many different indicators of child and adult wellbeing (e.g. Albrecht & Teachman 2003; Amato 2000; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Seltzer 1994; Teachman 2003; Teachman 2004). However, the vast majority of the existing research examines changes after one transition, most commonly divorce. There is little knowledge about the effects of multiple family structure transitions despite the recent increase in family instability. Because so many children are experiencing one or more family structure transitions, the lack of knowledge about the effects of multiple family transitions is a serious gap in family research. This paper looks at one aspect of family instability: the effects of multiple family transitions on mother-child relations.

Mother-Child Relationship Quality

Research about family instability is a fairly new phenomenon in family research, and we are aware of no study that specifically examines the effects of family instability on mother-child relationships. However, there is a rich literature dating back from Durkheim ([1896] 1951), Mead (1934), and Parsons and Bales (1995) about the role of parent-child relations in personality formation and well-being. Recent research often examines how children's relationships with their parents are affected by individual family structure changes, especially divorce. Amato and Booth (1996) found that divorce had a negative impact on affection between fathers and children but no impact on affection between mothers and children. They attribute this finding to the fact that children most often live with their mothers after divorce. Nonresident parent-child relationships are more likely to suffer as a result of divorce than resident parent-child relationships regardless of parent's gender (Amato and Booth 1991; Aquilino 1994). Probably as a consequence, much of the recent literature on parent-child relationship quality and parental involvement after divorce or father departure from the household focuses on nonresident fathers (e.g. King 1994; King and Sobolewski 2006). Since resident mothers are usually children's primary caretakers in single-parent families, we argue that special attention should be paid to the mother-child relationship.

There is some research on mother-child relationships after divorce, but the evidence is inconclusive. Some studies find that divorce has no effect on relationships between mothers and children (e.g. Amato and Booth 1996; Cooney 1994; White et al. 1986). Amato, Rezac, and Booth conclude that there is no effect of parental divorce on helping behaviors between mothers and children. However, the evidence about the effects of divorce on mother-child relations is not consistent. Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1982) conducted a study on mother-child relationship

quality after divorce and concluded that after one year of divorce, mothers were less affectionate and communicative with their children and punished them more harshly and inconsistently than married mothers. In more recent research, Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) found that relationships between custodial mothers and their children can improve over time but may be strained if custodial mothers remarry, indicating a possible instability effect. Aquilino (1994) notes that when children who grew up in intact families experience a parental divorce as adults, there is a significant negative effect of divorce on mother-child relationships. Similarly, Zill, Morrison, and Coiro (1993) find no effect of divorce on mother-child relationships when children are adolescents but notice a delayed effect of childhood divorce on mother-child relationships once children reach early adulthood. Some scholars suggest that a divorce-induced decline in a mother's resources may be responsible for a decline in the mother-child relationship (Brubaker 1990; Umberson 1992).

Factors which affect relationships between mothers and children have been of interest in family research for some time. Family religious life, maternal employment, and marital quality, for example, have been used as predictors of mother-child relationship quality (Pearce and Axinn 1998; Amato and Booth 1996; Owen, Easterbrooks, Chase-Lansdale, Goldberg 1984). Mother-child relationships have also been examined according to family structure. Single mothers have been found to have lowered involvement with and less supervision of children compared to married mothers (Astone and McLanahan 1991; Thomson et al. 1992). However, the potentially important effect of family instability on mother-child relationship quality remains unexamined. In his conclusion of a study on the living arrangements of children born to unwed mothers, Aquilino (1996) suggests that experiencing multiple transitions exposes children to a succession of caretakers and weakens attachment to any one caretaker, including the mother, who may also

feel less obligation for her child because of the presence of multiple caretakers, which may explain why children with more family transitions sometimes attempt early autonomy. The lack of consensus about the effects of divorce and the unknown effect of family instability on mother-child relationship quality in childhood and beyond suggests a need for further research in this area, especially since mother-child closeness has been found to be salient to children's happiness, life satisfaction, psychological functioning, and self-esteem into adulthood (Umberson 1992; Amato 1994).

This study will contribute to further knowledge about child well-being because mothers are usually a constant presence in children's lives, even in the face of family instability. A high-quality mother-child relationship can serve as a protective factor for children who research suggests are already experiencing stress as a consequence of family instability (Fomby and Cherlin forthcoming, Kamp Dush forthcoming). However, if mother-child relationship quality deteriorates as family instability increases, then potentially vulnerable children may be subject to added problems because of poor relations with their mothers. This study is important because the effects of mother-child relations on children's well-being can last well into adulthood (Amato 1994; Amato and Sobolewski 2001). Also, there is scant research on the consequences of family instability when measured to include both marital and cohabitation dissolution. Finally, this study will contribute to the mixed findings about whether divorce affects mother-child relations.

Family Instability

Interest in the processes and effects of family instability is a relatively recent development in family research. There seems to be an assumption of negative consequences of family instability for children, but there are few empirical studies concerning the specific

processes and outcomes associated with multiple changes in family structure. In this section we discuss the extant research in this area.

As yet the theoretical underpinnings about the effects of family instability are generally in agreement but are known by different names. Most recently, Fomby and Cherlin (forthcoming in *American Sociological Review*) refer to the longstanding yet understudied hypothesis that children who experience multiple transitions may fare worse developmentally as the *instability hypothesis*. Teachman (2003) offers an excellent description of two hypotheses that contribute to a *stability and change perspective*: stress and residential mobility. According to the stress hypothesis, changes in childhood living arrangements, such as parental marriage or divorce, cause psychological stress. The residential mobility hypothesis associates changes in family structure with changes in residence, which often causes obstacles for children. Wu and Martinson (1993) refer to an *instability and change hypothesis*. By any name, theories about family instability all suggest cumulative effects of family structure changes. Some previously identified effects of multiple family transitions include positive opinions of premarital sex and negative opinions of marriage (Axinn & Thornton 1996; Thornton 1985, 1991), increased risk of premarital intercourse, premarital birth and premarital cohabiting unions (Teachman 2003; Albrecht & Teachman 2003; Wu and Martinson 1993; Wu 1996), and more problem behaviors among young children (Cavanagh & Huston 2006). However, the potentially mediating effect of mother-child relationship quality has not been examined. It should also be noted that much research on instability includes transitions other than changes in family structure such as residence changes, negative life events, caregiver changes, parental job and income changes, or family deaths (e.g. Forman and Davies 2003; Ackerman et al. 1999). In this paper I am

concerned only with family instability as measured by family structure changes in the focal child's resident family.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Our main research question is whether and to what extent multiple family transitions affect the quality of children's relationships with their biological mothers. We extend the instability hypothesis to predict that children who experience multiple family transitions are less likely to have close, supportive relationships with or be highly involved with their biological mothers with every transition that they experience. I also predict that children who experience family instability are likely to have lower quality relationships with their mothers than children who experience no or one family structure change. In addition to the effects of the number of family structure transitions children experience, I study how type of family structure and type of transition impact children's relationships with their mothers. Previous research on mother-child relationship quality indicates that single mothers are less involved with their children than married mothers. Most transition literature focuses on divorce, and my study will determine whether some kinds of transitions are more detrimental to the mother-child relationship than others. It is important to consider each of these factors individually in order to obtain a clear picture of the mechanisms that may be affecting mother-child relationship quality when children experience family structure changes.

Method

Sample

The first wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) was used for these analyses (Udry, 2003). The Add Health study is based on interviews with students in grades 7 through 12 from a sample of 145 U.S. middle, junior high, and high schools

and their parents in 1995. The original sample consisted of all the students who were in attendance on the day that the in-school questionnaire was administered ($n = 90,118$). The first wave of data used for this project was the contractual data that included in-home interviews administered in 1995 to 20,745 of the students. The first wave of data also included a 40-minute interview, usually with the female head of the household.

Sample Design

The study began with the 20,745 in-home sample of adolescents from Wave 1. From this original sample, we filtered respondents for the following reasons. Of the original sample, all adolescents not born between 1977 and 1980 were dropped for two reasons. First, mothers were asked about their relationship histories from 1977 to 1995 therefore complete family structure histories were not available for those children born before 1977. Second, because the first 16 years of life are the focus of this study, children without data in their 16th year of life were excluded from the study, that is, children who were born after 1980 ($n =$). The second filter eliminated adolescents whose biological or adoptive mother did not complete the female-head of household interview ($n =$). Third, adolescents who spent more than 6 months away from their mothers during childhood were filtered from the sample because family structure experiences during the time away from the mother were unavailable ($n =$). Fourth, any adolescent with missing values on the weight variable was filtered from the sample due to the fact that the final data was weighted to provide for national estimates ($n =$). Fifth, any adolescent who was missing data on key variables (the relationship variables reported by the mother and used to construct the transition variables) were filtered from the dataset ($n =$). The weight filter resulted in a final sample size of 9069.

Sample Weighting

The survey (*svy*) commands in Stata (Version 9.1) were used to account for the clustered, stratified, and weighted nature of the Add Health sample. All reported analyses and percentages were run in Stata stratified by region of the country, clustered by school, and weighted following the recommendations of Add Health staff (Chantala and Tabor 1999).

Variables

Predictors

The data for the independent variables were collected at Wave 1. Relationship history was assessed for the past 18 years through a series of questions of the mothers at Wave 1. First, mothers were asked: “In the past 18 years, how many marriage and marriage-like relationships have you had?” Mothers were told that a “marriage-like relationship” meant “living with someone as if you are married to him or her when you are not”.

Mothers were then asked to think about their present or most recent relationship and were instructed to mark the years in which they were in the relationship between 1977 and 1995. Mothers were also asked whether the relationship was a marriage or marriage-like relationship and if it was still intact. If the relationship had dissolved, mothers were asked how the relationship ended – whether through separation, divorce, annulment, death, or other. If mothers answered that they had had more than one marriage or marriage-like relationship they were asked the same series of questions about their second and third most recent relationships. Therefore, the relationship history of the adolescents’ mothers includes complete information including duration on 3 previous marriage and marriage-like relationships. Unfortunately we do not have data on whether the mother experienced more than three marriages or marriage-like relationships. The data was then recoded into a series of variables measuring change and

stability in family structure. When data errors were discovered, discrepancies were resolved when possible through the use of the mother questionnaire in conjunction with the child questionnaires' household roster and sections on biological and residential parents.

Family type. Family type was coded as a series of dummy variables. Stable single parent family was coded 1 for offspring who were born to a single mother who never married or cohabited through the child's first 16 years. Stable married parents family was coded 1 for offspring whose mothers were married at birth and never divorced, and stable cohabiting family was coded 1 for offspring whose mothers were cohabiting at birth and never dissolved the cohabiting union. Unstable family was coded as 1 for any offspring whose mother changed her marital or cohabiting status from her status at the child's birth, whether through marriage, entrance into a cohabiting relationship, divorce, cohabitation dissolution, or death.

Number of transitions. The number of transitions was coded as the number of times a child's family transitioned from one family form to another (see table 1 for descriptive statistics). For example, if a child went from a married parent family to a single-parent family, that was coded as one transition. If a mother entered into a cohabiting relationship, that also was coded as one transition. Each transition in and out of a relationship, including situations in which the mother dissolved and reinitiated a relationship with the same individual, was coded as a transition. A strength of this study is the inclusion of entrance into and exit from cohabitation, which is a significant factor of family instability (Raley and Wildsmith 2004).

Type of transition. The type of transition the child experienced was coded as a series of dichotomous variables where 0 = *no experience of the particular transition* and 1 = *experience of the particular transition*. Children could have experienced 6 different transitions: mother marries, mother enters cohabiting relationship, mother divorces, mother dissolves cohabiting

relationship, death of the mother's spouse, and death of the mother's cohabiting partner (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

Outcomes

Mother-child relationship quality. Mother-child relationship quality was measured as the average of five questions related to mother-child relationship quality at the Wave 1 interview. Questions used included: *How close do you feel to your mother? How much do you think she cares about you?* Responses for these questions ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*. *Most of the time, your mother is warm and loving with you. You are satisfied with the way your mother and you communicate with each other. Overall, you are satisfied with your relationship with your mother.* Responses for these questions ranged from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. These responses were reversed coded before the measure of relationship quality was constructed ($\alpha = .84$). About one percent of the sample was missing data on the mother-child relationship quality questions.

Control Variables

Control variables include offspring gender, offspring age, offspring race, and mother education. Gender may have a significant effect on mother-child relationship quality, as because research has long suggested that girls are generally closer to their mothers in general than boys are (Chodorow 1978; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Larson and Richards 1994; Lye 1996). A developmental perspective suggests that age is also important because relationship quality with parents may deteriorate as children progress through adolescence (Steinberg 1987; 1991). Previous studies have yielded inconsistent results about racial variation in parent-child relationship quality (Lye 1996), so I include offspring race in the analysis in order to see if there are important racial differences. Mother's educational attainment may also be a factor predicting

relationship quality, since parenting styles vary according to SES (Lareau 2003). In future analyses I plan to expand the control variables to include parent's age and time since the last family structure transition.

Offspring gender was measured as a dichotomous variable. Offspring age was coded in years. Offspring race was measured as a series of dichotomous variables at Wave 1 (Black, White, Hispanic, Other). Mother education was measured at Wave 1 and was coded as 1 = *8th grade or less*, 2 = *some high school*, 3 = *high school graduate or GED*, 4 = *some college or post-high school trade school*, 5 = *college graduate*, and 6 = *post-graduate work*. The age of the mother was coded in years.

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