MOTHERS, FATHERS, AND THE LINK BETWEEN ADOLESCENT FAMILY

EXPERIENCES AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

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ABSTRACT: Using new data from the third wave of the National Survey of Families and Households, we examine the influence of detailed measures of family life on children's academic achievement, substance use, and early family formation and dissolution. We focus on the role of mothers' and fathers' parenting and relationships with children to assess the link between children's experiences of family structure and parental conflict in adolescence and their subsequent transitions to adulthood. We investigate the independent influences of mothers and fathers, as well as inconsistencies in parents' practices and beliefs. Our preliminary descriptive analysis indicates that adolescents who are exposed to family conflict experience weaker relationships with parents and more harsh discipline. We will further investigate theoretically important contrasts between the behaviors and bonds of mothers and fathers with respect to their children, as well as the conditioning effect of conflict on parents' influence over children. While much past work shows that family structure and conflict matter for children, identifying the ways in which adolescent experiences within families are linked to young adult outcomes provides insight into how family influences extend into adulthood.

There is a strong body of work that examines the relationship between childhood family structure and child outcomes, including what mediates family structure, such as economic factors, residential mobility, number of family transitions, and parenting (e.g., McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Thomson, Hanson and McLanahan 1994). Recently, researchers have given more attention to how conflict between continuously married parents affects children, with evidence suggesting that it influences children in ways similar to—and independent of—divorce (Hanson 1999; Musick, Meier, and Bumpass 2006).

There has been little research examining factors other than subsequent divorce that may explain the relationship between conflict and child outcomes (for an exception, see Amato and Sobolewski 2001). Economic factors, residential mobility, and number of family transitions are likely much less influential in explaining the effects of conflict than divorce, since conflict in continuously married parent families does not necessarily lead to changes in living arrangements or the loss of an earner from the household. Parenting, however, may play an important role, as there are various ways in which conflict between mothers and fathers may affect parents' behaviors and relationships with children. In this paper we examine the role of parenting in mediating the relationship between parental conflict and child outcomes during the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

BACKGROUND

Parenting practices and parent-child relationships are the behaviors and feelings that link parents to their children. Conflict between parents may produce changes in parenting practices, and these are likely to affect the well-being of children. Conflict often generates stress among spouses, leading to preoccupation and withdrawal among

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parents (Hetherington, Cox, and Cox 1982; Grych and Fincham 1990), which may in turn lead to less time, energy and patience with children. Under these conditions, parents may be quicker to anger and impose harsh parenting practices. In essence, parents' conflict with their spouses may "spillover" into their relationships with their children (Gerard et al 2006; Almeida, Wethington, and Chandler 1999). Classic work on parenting styles (Baumrind 1971 & 1973), and its elaborations (e.g. Maccoby and Martin 1983; 1991) suggest that an authoritative parenting style—characterized by nurturance and open communication but also control and high maturity demands—produces self-reliant and socially competent children. Children of stressed parents with quick tempers and harsh disciplinary practices may be disadvantaged in their ability to navigate the transition to adulthood.

In addition to parenting practices, the affective bond between parents and children may be weakened by persistent conflict (Amato 1993, Grych and Fincham 1990; Petersen and Zill 1986). This may occur because children are exposed to their parents' conflict and become disaffected from one or both parents due to their harsh behavior toward the other parent (Cummings and Davies 1994). Affective bonds may also weaken because parents withdraw from their children (Grych and Fincham 1990) – possibly because they are embarrassed about the conflict, because they simply do not have the energy to devote to nurturing a relationship with their child, or because they view their child as a product of a now tumultuous relationship. Marital conflict may result in less time together as a family, less warmth and openness, and less closeness among all family members. Weak parent-child bonds are associated with vulnerability to poor academic performance, risky

behaviors, and non-normative transitions to adulthood (Amato and Sobolewski 2001; Cherlin 1992).

Traditionally, research on parenting has focused on the mother's parenting behavior or the mother-child bond. However, a relatively new and exciting literature more carefully considers fathers' behaviors and bonds with children as well (Marsiglio 2004; Hofferth 2006, Hofferth et al 2002). Mothers' involvement with children is generally high, while fathers' involvement is more variable (Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean and Hofferth 2001). Mothers' parenting also appears more closely linked to child outcomes than fathers' (Musick and Bumpass 1999), although fathers' involvement may be influential only at the extreme ends of its more variable distribution. Because parental conflict necessarily involves both parents, we argue that understanding the influences of both mothers and fathers is especially important in trying to understand the potential mediating effect of parenting in the association between spousal conflict and child outcomes.

In addition to the independent contributions of mothers and fathers, the degree of consistency between parents may be important for children. Some research suggests that parental similarity in child-rearing orientations positively influences child well-being (Deal, Halverson, and Wampler 1999). Perhaps not surprisingly, Fletcher and colleagues (1999) find that the most beneficial sort of consistency occurs when parenting is 'good' (e.g., authoritative) from both parents, but having one 'good' parent is better than having consistently 'bad' (e.g., permissive or authoritarian) parenting from both mothers and fathers. High conflict marital relationships may produce more inconsistent parenting than low conflict marriages and fewer instances of 'good' parenting from both mothers and

fathers. The degree to which parents agree in their thoughts and behaviors regarding their children may be one factor explaining the link between conflict and child outcomes. Of course, we expect that agreement is best when it reflects characteristics of warmth, nurturance, and control.

Where research has examined the role of parenting and parent-child relationships in mediating the association between spousal conflict and child outcomes, the focus has been almost exclusively on outcomes in childhood or adolescence (Gerard et al 2006; Almeida, Wethington and Chandler 1999; Buehler and Gerard 2002; Krishnakumar and Buehler 2000; Osborne and Fincham 1996). There are a few examples of work looking at the ways in which exposure to parental conflict in childhood influences child well-being beyond the adolescent years. Using the Marital Instability over the Life Course Study, Amato and Sobolewski (2001) find that parent-child closeness mediates the relationship between marital discord, disruption and adult children's psychological well-being. Using the first two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households, Musick and Bumpass (1999) find that conflict between parents disadvantages children with regard to high school graduation and is associated with higher risks of premarital sex and cohabitation (v. marriage) as a first union type. They find a modest mediating role of economic factors, attitudes about the family, and parenting behaviors.

In the present study, we use new data from the third wave of the National Survey of Families and Households. We focus on the roles of parenting and parent-child relationships in linking children's adolescent experiences with family structure and parental conflict to their young adult outcomes. We explore differences in the typical behaviors and relationships of mothers and fathers in relation to their children, as well as

inconsistencies between mothers and fathers in the same family. We further explore family time as a potentially important mechanism in shaping the overall family environment.

PRESENT STUDY

In this study, we examine the ways in which parenting practices and affective parent-child bonds may mediate the relationship between parental conflict and children's transitions to adulthood. We assess the degree to which parental conflict is differentially associated with poorer parenting practices and parent-child relationship quality for mothers and fathers; we also examine the degree to which consistency or inconsistency between mothers and fathers on these measures matters for their children's well-being. We consider a range of young adult transition outcomes in the domains of school, substance use, and family formation. We focus specifically on early transitions into sex and union formation, as well as union dissolution.

We use new data from the third wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), which has some significant strengths relative to other data used to address conflict and parenting. It allows us to focus on two key stages in the life course: adolescence and young adulthood. Perhaps more than other stages, adolescence is characterized by intense developmental change (Petersen 1988), and young adulthood by dense demographic transitions (Rindfuss 1991). Family experiences during adolescence may be particularly important in setting the course for the demographic changes of young adulthood (Hogan 1985; Hogan and Astone 1986). The NSFH also has interviews with multiple members of the same family; in particular, it includes both parents' reports of marital conflict, parenting behaviors, and parent-child relationship quality, as well as

children's reports of young adult behaviors. Finally, the NSFH contains rich information from parents about their own social class backgrounds, as well as education, union, and childbearing histories. With these data, we are able to control for background characteristics and mothers' family formation experiences that are prior to prospectively measured conflict, parenting, and family structure.

Our analyses address the following questions: Do parents behave and feel differently about their children in the context of conflictual relationships with their spouses? What are the differences between mothers' and fathers' parenting in the context of conflict, and whose parenting matters more? Are there greater inconsistencies in parenting in the presence of conflict? Can parenting account for the association between parent conflict and the well-being of their young adult children?

DATA AND METHODS

National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH)

The first wave of the NSFH was collected between 1987 and 1988 and involved interviews with over 13,000 respondents, including a main cross-section and an over-sample of minorities, single-parent families, families with stepchildren, cohabiting couples, and recently married persons. In each household, an adult was randomly selected as the primary respondent, and the spouse or cohabiting partner was asked to complete a shorter, self-administered questionnaire. The second wave of data collection (NSFH2) was fielded between 1992 and 1994; the most recent wave (NSFH3) was fielded in 2001 and 2002.

Of particular interest to the present study, a focal child was randomly selected from the household roster at NSFH1 and followed over the subsequent surveys. At the

first wave, primary respondents provided information on the designated focal child. At the second and third waves, focal children themselves were also interviewed. The availability of prospectively measured self-reports from multiple members of the same family allows us to examine variation in parental conflict, parenting, and its relationship to child outcomes. We examine how family experiences reported by parents at NSFH1 and NSFH2 relate to focal child outcomes at NSFH3.

Focal child interviews were attempted with children age 10 and older at NSFH2. Attempts were made to interview focal children 18 and older at NSFH3, regardless of whether an interview was completed at NSFH2. About half of all eligible NSFH1 focal children were interviewed at NSFH3. Attrition was greater among nonwhite and socioeconomically disadvantaged respondents, as well as those living with a step or single-parent family at NSFH1. Despite these differences, prior analyses (Musick et al. 2006) showed that NSFH1 family experiences were related to NSFH2 focal child outcomes in similar ways, regardless of whether samples were restricted to respondents at NSFH3. This provides some evidence that results reported here are not affected by attrition.

For the older focal children, we use data on family of origin from the NSFH1 main respondent and spouse interviews (when the older children are 12-18); for the younger focal children, we use data from NSFH2 (when they are 10-17). We thus capture family structure and conflict while all children are in their adolescent years. In all, 1,952 focal children were interviewed at NSFH3. We restrict our analyses to the 1,773 children who were living with their biological mother at NSFH1, thereby excluding single father and stepmother families, which are relatively rare and cannot be analyzed

separately. We also exclude a small number of cases living with widowed single mothers, and we lose additional cases missing information from one or the other parent at NSFH1 or NSFH2. Detailed information on sample sizes is included in the tables (below).

Measures of Childhood Family Experience

Parental conflict is measured on the basis of couples' responses to six items concerning frequency of disagreement. Main respondents and their spouses were asked: "The following is a list of subjects on which couples often have disagreements. How often, if at all, in the last year have you had open disagreements about each of the following…" The subjects include household tasks, money, spending time together, sex, in-laws, and the children. We generate a disagreement scale by averaging all valid responses from husbands and wives to these six items. We keep observations on conflict when only one spouse report is available. Over 80% of our conflict scores are based on data from both parents.

Families are classified according to their scores on conflict: "low conflict" families fall in the bottom third of scores, "medium" in the middle, and "high" in the top. We use this classification in the analyses reported here, although we explored alternative measures. In preliminary analyses, we examined agreement and disagreement in parent reports of conflict, where both parents agreed that conflict was low, parents disagreed about the level of conflict, and both agreed that conflict was high. We examined how child outcomes were related to our measure of average parent reports on the one hand and our measure of parent agreement-disagreement on the other. Results were very similar regardless of definition.

Using conflict scores to make distinctions between continuously married-parent families, we generate 5 adolescent family types: low, medium, and high conflict continuously married-parent families; stepparent families; and single-parent families. As described earlier, we use reports of family structure and conflict from NSFH1 for the older focal children and NSFH2 for the younger focal children. Family structure is determined on the basis of the resident parent's union status and history. Children are coded as living with continuously married parents if their parents were married or living together within one year of the focal child's birth and remain in the same union (we include 3 cohabiting families by this definition). They are coded as coming from stepparent families if parents are in a union that began more than a year after the focal child's birth (in our adolescent family sample, there are 48 cohabiting stepfamilies). Finally, they are classified as coming from single-parent families if their mothers are not married or cohabiting.

Comparing variations in conflict within continuously married families and parenting across all family structures allows us to examine how high conflict married parent families differ from single- and stepparent families in both parenting practices and on child outcomes. Table 1 shows the distribution of our adolescent family measure (data are unweighted to represent the samples being analyzed; weighted distributions would differ because of the nature of oversampling in the original sampling design).

– Table 1 about here –

We use multiple measures to capture various dimensions of parenting. We generate parallel measures for mothers and fathers (or stepfathers) in all two-parent families. We have only mother reports in single-parent families, as we excluded single-

father families from our analysis. In single parent families we have only mother reports. *Parent-child relationship quality* is based on a single item rating the overall quality of the parent's relationship with the focal child. *Time spent with children* is a composite of four items including time spent in leisure activities, at home, having private talks with children, and helping children with homework. *Positive parenting* indicates how often parents engage in behaviors such as hugging and kissing their children. *Negative parenting* is an average of items about the frequency of behaviors such as yelling and hitting children. *Democratic parenting* is a single indicator for how often the parent consults with children about rules and decisions that affect them. *Dinner with children* is based on parents' reports of the number of days per week they eat dinner with at least one of their children. These measures are all standardized to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 for ease of comparison across waves of data collection and measures.

One additional measure, *family dinners*, is a dichotomous indicator scored 1 for those whose mother and father both report eating dinner with their children at least 5 times a week. While the other variables tap specific parent (mother or father) behaviors with children, 'family dinners' reflects time together as a family. It may indicate the willingness of parents to engage in joint activities, and may also signal something about the overall family environment.

Outcomes

We examine a range of outcomes related to the transition to adulthood. Outcomes are measured at NSFH3, when focal children are ages 19-34 (the younger focal children are 19-27). They include a set of outcomes related to academic achievement: high school dropout, poor grades in high school ("C" or below), and never attended a two- or four-

year college. Three outcomes relate to substance use: smoking in the past 30 days, binge drinking in the past 30 days (5 or more drinks in one sitting), and marijuana use in the past year. These are associated with poor socioeconomic and health outcomes, delinquency, psychological problems, and later substance addiction (e.g., Cooper et al. 2003; Kandel 2002). Table 2 shows the frequency of each of these behaviors in our sample: 13% dropped out of high school, nearly a quarter had poor grades in high school, and about 40% never attended college. Substance use is reasonably common: about a third of the sample reported smoking and binge drinking in the past month, and about a quarter had used marijuana in the past year.

- Table 2 about here -

We also include a set of transitions related to family formation: early age at first sex (before age 16), early cohabitation (before age 21), nonmarital childbearing, and union dissolution. Children from single-parent families are typically younger at first sex and are more likely to have a child out of marriage, cohabit, and experience the dissolution of their first union (Wu 1996; McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Thornton 1991; Pears et al. 2005). While sex, union formation, and childbearing are clearly normative life course transitions, *early* sex and *early* and *nonmarital* union formation and childbearing may have negative consequences not associated with later transitions.   First sex at a young age increases exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and nonmarital pregnancy (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1994; Resnick et al. 1997). Nonmarital childbearing may truncate educational attainment (Astone and Upchurch 1989; Teti and Lamb 1989) and foreclose or diminish opportunities on the marriage market (Anderson 2000). Early cohabitation and disruption may set expectations with respect to the

permanency of marriage-like relationships. Further, cohabitation potentially pulls young people out of the socialization and interactions that might lead to successful partner selection. Early marriage is not only tied to much higher rates of divorce (Raley and Bumpass 2003), but also with associated experiences of single-motherhood, remarriage and the link between these and the third generation's wellbeing. The same may hold of early cohabitation.

Table 2 shows the frequency of family-related transitions: the transition to first sex occurred before age 16 for 22% of young men and women (that is, of those who did not make the transition to first sex prior to the time we observed their adolescent family experiences). About 23% cohabited by the age of 21, 13% had a child outside of marriage, and 45% experienced the dissolution of their first cohabiting or marital union.

Controls

In multivariate models, we will control for as rich an array of characteristics as possible, while being careful not to include variables that are a product of family structure or conflict. This is a difficult issue because our sample includes continuously married parents and families that have experienced at least one – if not multiple – transitions. The availability of mothers' education, union, and childbearing histories, as well as detailed information on her social class background, will allow us to control for important characteristics of mothers that are prior to family structure and conflict, including: race, highest level of education prior to the focal child's birth, childhood family structure, age at first birth, and union dissolution prior to the focal child's birth. These factors are likely associated with both family structure and child wellbeing. We will also control for the focal child's sex and NSFH3 age.

As noted earlier, many previous studies report an association between family structure, family conflict, and child outcomes (Amato and Booth 1997; Amato and Sobolewski 2001; Musick and Bumpass 1999; Musick, Meier, and Bumpass 2006). Similarly, a substantial body of literature suggests that parenting practices influence child outcomes (for a review see Demo and Cox 2000). The links between spousal conflict and parenting, however, are less clear. Table 3 shows the mean scores on our parenting variables by family type. The first panel shows mothers' parenting measures by family type, the second shows fathers' parenting, and the final panels shows mean differences between mothers' and fathers' parenting. Recall that the mother and father measures are standardized, so that a score of .50 indicates half of a standard deviation above the mean, for example.

-Table 3 about here –

Some general patterns are evident. Mothers in high conflict (v. low-conflict) married families report lower relationship quality with the focal child, and they are more likely to engage in negative parenting behaviors like yelling and hitting. This is consistent with a spillover hypothesis. Single and remarried mothers also seem to spend less time and engage in less positive parenting. This is consistent with the notion of time constraints and competing demands on single mothers and mothers with new partners (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

Fathers in high conflict (v. low conflict) married families score lower on relationship quality, time, positive parenting, and democratic parenting; they score higher on negative parenting. Stepfathers follow the same pattern, but the gaps between them and fathers in low conflict marriages are bigger on all measures except negative

parenting. Yelling and hitting their children seems to be most common among parents who do not get along well with each other.

Within family differences between mothers and fathers are relatively small in high conflict compared to low conflict families; they are much more significant in stepparent families. This is consistent with different norms and expectations regarding the roles of step versus biological fathers (Cherlin 1978), irregardless of how families function. Mothers and fathers in high conflict families resemble each other in their parenting styles and relationships with children more than we expected. For example, we see no evidence that children have stronger bonds with mothers than fathers. We did not explore, however, whether there may be a differential strengthening of same-sex parent-child bonds. These kinds of differences would not be detected in this preliminary analysis. Further, our measures may not capture the sorts of parenting characteristics, like childrearing orientations or values, that are important for interparental consistency (Deal et al 1999).

PROPOSED ANALYSIS

Prior literature shows a relationship between conflict, family structure, and child outcomes, as well as between parenting and child wellbeing. Our descriptive analysis of differences in parenting by family structure and conflict suggests that parenting may play a role in explaining the link between family structure, conflict, and child wellbeing. We will analyze this question more systematically. We will use logistic regression to analyze high school dropout, poor grades, no college attendance, and substance use, and we will rely on cox proportional hazard models to examine the determinants of time to sex, cohabitation, nonmarital birth, and union dissolution. We will run a series of analyses,

successively adding indicators of mother and father parenting to models of family structure and conflict on young adult schooling, risk taking, and family-related transitions. We will examine how the estimated effects of family structure and – especially – conflict change given the addition of parenting behaviors and bonds, i.e., we will gauge the extent to which the association between conflict and child wellbeing is explained by mothering and fathering.

Table 3 reports few differences within continuously married parent families in mother and father behaviors and bonds with children. Perhaps this is because, as suggested by Fletcher and colleagues (1999), while it is best to have two good parents, at least one good parent is important to maintaining child well-being . Consistency in the case of unhealthy parenting practices is not best for children. Rather than a simple difference measure, this implies a set of categories that capture more theoretically important combinations of parenting styles. We will test various ways of incorporating the combination of mothers' and fathers' behaviors and relationships.

In addition to testing for mediating effects of parenting, we will also test interactive effects between conflict and theoretically appropriate parent measures for specific outcomes. For example, values that parents hold for their child's education (a measure we have, but have not yet explored here), may be less influential for academic outcomes in the context of parental conflict. Similarly, the transmission of family values and the effectiveness of parents' rules (also available, but not yet tested here), may be weakened by high levels of parental conflict.

From existing literature and our own prior analyses, we know that family structure and conflict are important in shaping the transition from adolescence to

adulthood. From the parenting literature, we also know that parenting practices and affective bonds between parents and children are important influences as well. The initial analysis for this paper shows that parenting behaviors and parent-child relationships vary by family structure and conflict. Our planned analysis will test whether parenting factors mediate the relationship between conflict and young adult outcomes. We will explore the joint and possibly contingent ways that mothers' and fathers' parenting is shaped by spousal conflict. In addition, we will explore the conditions under which parents have more or less influence over their children. A more holistic view of the family environment may help us in our understanding of how adolescent experiences with family structure and conflict matter for young adult outcomes. Understanding the mechanisms linking family arrangements and child wellbeing also provides insight into what parents do to buffer their children from family strain.

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Table 1. Adolescent Family Type

	N	Percent
Family Type		
Low Conflict	256	16.03
Medium Conflict	308	19.29
High Conflict	335	20.98
Step Family	336	21.04
Single-Parent Family	362	22.67
Total	1,597	100

Notes: Data unweighted.

Table 2. Focal Child Outcomes Measured at NSFH3

	N	Percent
Academic Achievement		
High school dropout	1592	12.56
Poor grades in high school	1577	23.15
Never attended college	1595	38.93
Substance Use		
Smoking past 30 days	1570	32.55
Binge drinking past 30 days	1595	35.55
Marijuana use past year	1586	24.21
Family-Related Transitions		
First sex by age 16	947	21.65
Cohabitation by age 21	1574	22.74
Nonmarital birth	1566	13.22
Nonmarital birth -- women only	841	16.17
Union dissolution (those ever in union)	955	45.34

Notes: Data unweighted.

Table 3. Parenting Measures by Adolescent Family Type

Parenting Variables:	Continuously Married Families						stepparent family		single parent family	
	low conflict		medium conflict		high conflict					
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean
Mother:										
rel quality w/focal	232	0.23	296	-0.03	314	-0.15	306	-0.07	324	-0.20
time w/ kids	227	-0.05	293	-0.15	315	-0.04	301	-0.31	317	-0.17
dinners w/kids	224	0.20	292	0.09	317	0.03	298	-0.25	313	-0.30
positive parenting	205	-0.04	275	-0.18	284	-0.07	279	-0.14	302	-0.19
negative parenting	205	-0.52	274	-0.28	283	0.09	279	-0.16	302	0.02
democratic parenting	228	0.05	293	-0.05	315	-0.08	301	0.01	315	0.19
Father:										
rel quality w/focal	218	0.24	273	0.01	306	-0.10	215	-0.54		
time w/ kids	221	-0.04	264	-0.11	298	-0.14	213	-0.36		
dinners w/kids	222	0.10	260	0.14	297	-0.08	208	-0.27		
positive parenting	200	-0.02	242	-0.12	271	-0.21	195	-0.46		
negative parenting	200	-0.37	245	-0.09	273	0.10	195	-0.35		
democratic parenting	221	0.18	264	0.05	296	-0.07	213	-0.18		
Prop 5+ Family Dinners	166	0.73	220	0.72	243	0.58	176	0.52		
Difference: mothers - fathers										
rel quality w/focal	201	0.02	263	-0.07	293	-0.03	193	0.48		
time w/ kids	194	0.04	251	-0.02	280	0.12	196	0.13		
dinners w/kids	194	0.00	248	-0.04	282	0.10	189	0.03		
positive parenting	174	0.01	233	-0.02	256	0.11	179	0.37		
negative parenting	174	-0.12	235	-0.15	257	0.00	179	0.17		
democratic parenting	194	-0.15	250	-0.12	277	-0.05	196	0.27		

Notes: Data Unweighted