Predicting Parental Separation: Do Parent-Child Relationships Matter?

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In attempting to understand the causes of divorce, researchers have focused their efforts on both structural and interpersonal factors. Regarding structural influences, changes in family composition, available resources, and individual characteristics (e.g. age, race) have been found to be related to divorce (Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002). To date, research on interpersonal factors has focused on the relationship between the mother and father as a predictor of divorce. Several studies have suggested that couples are more likely to remain married if they are able to manage conflict and develop healthy styles of interacting over time (Gottman, 1994; Markman, 1991, & Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). However, one area that has been underrepresented in the literature is that of the parent-child relationship. This study aims to investigate whether parent-child relationships are related to parental separation, defined here as the father moving out of the household, even after controlling for parental conflict.

Methods

Sample

Data for this study come from the 1997 National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY97).The present analysis uses a sub-sample of youth who were ages 12-14 during the first wave of data collection and follows them until the third wave of data (N=2085). This age group and time period were selected based on the availability of the family process measures. The sample was further restricted to include only youth who were living with both biological parents at wave one and who were living with their biological mother across all three waves in order to predict the father moving out of the household. The father moved out of 93 of the households between waves one and three, resulting in what might be considered a rare event.

Measures

Father in the household. The dependent variable was coded dichotomously each wave for whether the father was living in the household or out of the household (0=in the house, 1=out of the house). At wave 1, due to the criteria by which the sample was selected, all of the fathers were living in the household.

Parent-youth relationship. Youth also reported on their relationships with their mother and father separately at each of the three waves through 7 items concerning closeness, conflict, and respect in the parent-child relationship. The alphas are .75 and .82 for the mother-youth and father-youth relationships, respectively.

Parental monitoring. Parental monitoring, that is how much parents know about adolescents' activities and peers, was measured through youth report for each parent at each wave through a four-item standard scale. (alphas are .71 for mothers and .81 for fathers).

Parents' marital relationship. Youth reported on conflict and closeness within their parents' relationship through two six-item scales adapted from Conger and Elder (1994). One assessed mothers' behaviors towards fathers (alpha .74) and the other fathers' behaviors towards mothers (alpha .81).

Control variables. Numerous variables which have been shown to be correlated with both the parent-child relationship and the mother-father relationship were included as controls in analyses: poverty (1=poor, 0=not poor), mother's unemployment (1=unemployed, 0=employed), mother's education, father's education, child's gender (1=female, 0=male), child's race, number of minors in the household, and age of youth. Time variables were also included in the model as controls.

Analyses

Analyses employ a complementary log-log analysis, a type of duration model (Clayton & Hills, 1993; Long, 1997). The data were first reshaped so that each individual had values for each variable in each of the three waves in order to incorporate time changing variables at each time point and control for time itself. The complementary log-log analysis is an alternative to logit and probit analyses. It is more appropriate for these data in that the transformation is not symmetric. Instead, the tail is fat as it approaches zero but more quickly approaches one, making it a more theoretically sound model when the outcome under study is rare (Buckley and Westerland, 2004). Since the dependent variable, the father moving out of the household, occurred for only 4.5% of the respondents, this relatively rare event is appropriately modeled by a log-log function. Data were clustered by the identification numbers of the respondents since measures were repeated for each individual in the analysis; however, when the cluster component was removed from the analysis, no significant changes in the results occurred.

The equation used for the analysis is as follows:

$x'_{i,t}\beta = \beta_0 + \beta_1$Youth's Relationship with Father + β_2Youth's Relationship with Mother + β_3Monitoring by Father + β_4Monitoring by Mother + β_5Father Supports Mother + β_6Mother Supports Father + β_7Poor + β_8Mother Unemployment + β_9Father High School + β_{10}Father Less than High School + β_{11}Mother High School + β_{12}Mother Less than High School + β_{13}Youth's Gender + β_{14}Hispanic + β_{15}Black + β_{16}Number of Minors + β_{17}Age of Youth + β_{18}Time2 + β_{19}Time3.

The probabilities were estimated using the log-log function:

$\pi_{i,t} = 1\text{-}\exp[-\exp(x'_{i,t}\beta)]$.

Results

The overall fit of the model is better than if we were estimating by chance alone, as indicated by the percent reduction in error of .0324. In other words, we are able to predict 3.24% more with this model than by chance alone. Considering the rare event nature of the model, this represents a good fit. Results of the analysis for individual variables are presented in the Table 1, and predictive probabilities are discussed below.

Parent-Youth Relationship

A more positive adolescent-mother relationship predicted a higher likelihood of fathers moving out, while the adolescent-father relationship was not a significant predictor. As the relationship between a mother and the youth increases on the 35-point scale from two standard deviations below the mean (14.75) to the mean (24.67), the probability of the father moving out of the house increases by .04. From the mean (24.67) to two standard deviations above the mean (34.49) the probability goes up additionally by .04. Generally speaking, a father is more likely to leave the house if the youth has a better relationship with his/her biological mother.

Parental Monitoring

In contrast, fathers' monitoring, but not mothers', predicted a lower likelihood of fathers' leaving the household. More specifically, as a father's monitoring decreases on the 20-point scale from two standard deviations above the mean (15.72) to the mean (7.74), the probability of the father moving out of the house increases .045. From the mean (7.74) to two standard deviations below the mean (0), the probability of the father moving out of the house increases by an additional .10.

Parents' Marital Relationship

Fathers' relationships with mothers also predicted a lower likelihood of fathers' leaving. The probability of the father moving out of the house increases by .04 as the father's support of the mother decreases on the 30-point scale from two standard deviations above the mean (27.48) to the mean (18.64). The probability increases an additional .085 as the father's support of the mother goes from the mean (18.64) to two standard deviations below the mean (9.81).

Control Variables

Three of the demographic control variables were significant: Father's education, mother's education, and youth's age. Fathers with less than a high school education, compared to fathers with more than a high school education, are more likely to move out of the house by an increased probability of .10. However, if the mother has less than a high school education, compared to more than a high school education, the probability of the father moving out of the house decreases by .05. Finally, as a child's age increases, the probability of the father moving out of the house increases.

Discussion

Concurrent with past research, these results found that parental relationship quality significantly predicts marital separation in this sample of families with early adolescents. However, these results also suggest the importance of parent-child relationships in predicting fathers leaving a household. Specifically, results found that a father is more likely to move out of the household if his youth has a more positive and supportive relationship with the mother. One possible explanation for this finding is that a strong mother-child relationship alienates the father from the family, making it easier for him to leave. Another similar possibility is that fathers may try to compensate for poor mother-child relationships by staying in the household. In addition, fathers who exhibit more consistent monitoring of their adolescent are more likely to stay in the household. One possibility is that before a father is going to move out of the household, he withdraws from parental roles such as monitoring. However, the negative direction of the coefficient may also serve as evidence that father involvement operates as a protective factor for couples, helping to retain fathers' overall commitment to and engagement in family life, which has potential implications for family interventions.

References

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Table 1 *Results of log-log analysis predicting father leaving household*

	Coefficient	Robust Standard Error
Youth's Relationship with Father	-.014	.026
Youth's Relationship with Mother	.075*	.032
Monitoring by Father	-.110**	.038
Monitoring by Mother	.070	.049
Father Supports Mother	-.088**	.029
Mother Supports Father	.004	.031
Poor	.436	.275
Mother Unemployment	-.339	.314
Father High School	.271	.278
Father Less than High School	.859*	.352
Mother High School	-.395	.286
Mother Less than High School	-.995*	.459
Youth's Gender	-.221	.228
Hispanic (Youth's race)	-.125	.299
Black (Youth's race)	.455	.288
Number of Minors in Household	.052	.117
Age of Youth	1.27**	.228
Time 2	15.69**	.274
Time 3	14.58**	.399
Log likelihood = -304.017	$+p < .10$ $*p < .05$ $**p < .01$	
Percent Reduction Error = .0324		