Influences of Family Structure, Conflict, and Change on Transitions to Adulthood

Kelly Musick
University of Southern California

Larry Bumpass
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Ann Meier
University of Minnesota

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Families serve as the primary financial and social support system for youth as they negotiate the transition to adulthood (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut 2005). The past half-century has seen extensive changes in both "typical" family structures and the transition experiences of youth en route to adulthood. This paper examines these related changes. We investigate the influence of family structure *and* functioning during childhood on transitions to adulthood, including academic success and risk-taking behaviors. Our analysis relies on data from three waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). It takes advantage of rich, prospective measures of parent relationships and change in relationships over time. We examine differences in child outcomes by family structure, but also acknowledge the importance of variation in intact families for child wellbeing, distinguishing between high and low conflict marriages. Preliminary findings suggest that conflict in intact families is related to young adult transitions in ways similar to single- and step-parent families. Moreover, its association appears (for some outcomes) to be independent of subsequent marital disruption.

Background

The landscape of the family as a social institution has changed dramatically over the past half century. Marriage is taking place later in the life course, childbearing is increasingly

detached from marriage, cohabitation is on the rise, and divorce remains common (Raley 2000). These changes have led to a more diverse set of family experiences for young people. Family change and its consequences have captured the attention of scholars, policy-makers, and the general public alike. Demographers have spent considerable effort measuring, describing and analyzing the order and timing of family events. In large part stemming from concern over the effects of single parenthood on child wellbeing, non-profit groups, states and the federal government have created a set of initiatives characterized as the marriage movement, aimed at promoting and strengthening marriage.

Research has consistently found that spending time in a single- or step-parent family is associated with poorer child outcomes relative to living with two married biological parents (McLanahan and Sandefur 2004; Musick and Bumpass 1999). Yet, recent evidence suggests that youth who experience parental divorce do not exhibit overwhelming changes in temperament or academic success in the years after family disruption (Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft, and Keirnan 2005; Aughinbaugh, Pierret and Rothestein 2005). Moreover, while there may be negative consequences for some youth (e.g. boys) on particular outcomes (e.g. behavior problems), most youth are unaffected on a range of measures (Morrison and Cherlin 1995). These studies rely on prospective measures of family experiences assessed over multiple time points, allowing them to account for a range of pre-disruption parent, child, and family characteristics.

The estimated effects of family disruption may depend on when family experiences are measured; they may also depend on when child outcomes are observed. Most research on the effects of divorce has focused on child outcomes in the adolescent years. Work based on the National Child Development Study in Britain, however, follows the effects of divorce into young adulthood and finds that parents' marital dissolution negatively affects children's socio-

economic and psychological well-being as young adults (Sigle-Rushton et al. 2005). Corak (2001) finds that compared to young adult children who lost a parent by death, those who experience a parental divorce face negative outcomes in their own family formation behaviors, but are no different with regard to economic success (see too Lang and Zagorsky 2000). Family-of-origin experience may become particularly relevant as young people take on new roles associated with adulthood.

The literature has focused on the consequences for children of spending time in single- and step-parent families and has attempted to isolate the mechanisms linking family structure and wellbeing (for example, half or more of the association between divorce and poor child outcomes is due to income loss [Morrion and Cherlin 1995; Sandefur and McLanahan 1994]). Family conflict is also likely to influence family structure and child well-being. Couples in high conflict marriages are more likely to divorce (White 1990), and children in high conflict families are more likely to suffer from a multitude of problems (Amato & Booth 1997; Jekielek 1998). Thus, when measuring family influences, it is important to include both the structural and functional elements of the family. In other words, for children, one important familial advantage stems from having two parents present in the home; a second advantage stems from the successful collaboration of those two parents (Furstenberg and Kiernan 2001). Relatively little effort has gone into understanding how variation in *intact* families affects child wellbeing.

Data, Measures, and Methods

The present study examines the influence of various family-of-origin factors on young adult academic outcomes and risk-taking behaviors using three waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The first wave of data 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. Focal children are ages 5 to 18 at NSFH1 when we first observe their family characteristics; they are 20 to 33 when we assess outcomes at NSFH3.

Our measure of family type combines structure and functioning by designating high, medium, and low conflict intact families, single-parent families, and step-parent families. Conflict is measured on the basis of 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 and group families according to low, medium, and high scores. Table 1 shows the distribution of family type measured at NSFH1 among focal children who responded at NSFH3 (data are unweighted).

-- Table 1 about here --

We measure young adult outcomes at NSFH3, including poor grades in high school ("C" or below), high school dropout, early sex (younger than 16), ever smoked, binge drinking in the past month (5 or more drinks in one sitting), and ever tried marijuana. High school graduation is defined as having received a diploma at graduation, and it excludes children who passed a high school equivalency test such as the GED. In terms of labor market outcomes, exam-certified high school equivalents bear a stronger resemblance to high school dropouts than to graduates (Cameron and Heckman 1993). Age at first intercourse is determined by responses to the question, "How old were you the first time (if ever) that you had sexual intercourse?" If respondents had first sex before age 16, they were considered "early" relative to peers. Recent research suggests that the statistically normative age for first sex is between 16 and 17 years old (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1999; Longmore, Manning, Giordano, and Rudolph 2004).

Table 2 shows the frequency of each of our young adult measures (data are unweighted). Nearly one-quarter of our respondents had poor grades in high school, and 14 percent dropped out. The risk behaviors are not uncommon among this sample: about one-third had sex before age 16; three-quarters had smoked cigarettes; 36 percent had recently engaged in binge drinking; and over half of respondents had tried marijuana.

-- Table 2 about here --

Preliminary Results and Analysis Plan

We conduct two sets of analyses: The first relates family experiences to NSFH3 outcomes among the younger and older focal children (ages 5-18 at NSFH1). While preliminary results presented here examine NSFH1 family measures and their association with NSFH3 focal child outcomes, we will do more in the coming months to take fuller advantage of data collected at NSFH2. The second set of analyses limits our sample to the younger focal children (ages 5-11

at NSFH1) so that we can follow changes in their family lives while they are still in the parental home. We relate trajectories of family change between NSFH1 and NSFH2 to young adult outcomes as measured at NSFH3.

Table 3 provides preliminary results of our analysis of the younger and older sample. We calculate logistic regression models of family structure and functioning on the achievement and risk-taking outcomes using low-conflict intact families as the reference group. In these analyses, we control only for age. Data show that, compared to low-conflict intact families, those from families with some conflict are at an increased odds of smoking, binge drinking and drug use. Those from high-conflict intact families are more likely to engage in all risk-taking behaviors, and also more likely to perform poorly and/or drop-out high school. Single- and step-parent families are associated with all of the outcomes examined, with the exception of binge drinking. Associations appear to be stronger among the non-intact families than the high-conflict intact families, although the statistical significance of these contrasts have not been tested. Stepfamilies and single-parent families appear very similar to each other on most outcomes (again, the statistical significance of these contrasts will be tested).

-- Table 3 about here –

In Table 4, the sample is restricted to younger focal children in intact families at NSFH1 (N=596). Of these families, 68 experienced marital disruption between NSFH1 and NSFH2. Odds ratios are estimated from logistic regression models controlling only for the focal child's age at NSFH1. Model 1 examines parental separation between NSFH1 and NSFH2, and model 2 includes whether the parents reported high levels of conflict at NSFH1. Here, we use all three waves of data, which allows us to examine trajectories of change in the family lives of children. In particular, it allows us to examine whether and to what extent pre-disruption characteristics of

the parental relationship account for the association between parental separation and young adult wellbeing. Data show that pre-disruption conflict mediates virtually none of the observed associations between subsequent separation, achievement, and risk-taking. While it has no mediating role, conflict at NSFH1 is associated with 2 of our 6 outcomes, independent of whether parents subsequently separate: it increases the odds of poor grades by 85% and trying marijuana by 70%. This suggests that conflict may be related to child wellbeing beyond its role in the divorce process.

-- Table 4 about here --

Of course, many factors influence both family dynamics and child wellbeing. In further analyses, we will control for a rich set of family background characteristics. In addition, we will incorporate family measures from both NSFH1 and NSFH2. To start, we will look at the implications of using family measures from NSFH1 for the older focal children and the same family measures from NSFH2 for the younger focal children, so that our indicators for both sets of focals come from the adolescent years.

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Table 1. Focal Child Family Type Measured at NSFH1

	Freq.	Percent
Intact - low conflict	454	26.53
Intact - middle conflict	300	17.53
Intact - high conflict	309	18.06
Step	194	11.34
Single	454	26.53
Total	1,711	100

Notes: Unweighted tabulations from NSFH1. Sample includes NSFH3 focal child respondents (ages 5-18 at NSFH1) with valid data on NSFH1 family type.

Table 2. Focal Child Achievement and Risk-Taking Measured at NSFH3

	N	Percent
Poor grades in high school	1684	24.17
High school dropout	1711	13.91
Early sex (before age 16)	1604	34.98
Ever smoked	1683	75.58
Binge drinking past month	1707	35.62
Ever tried marijuana	1671	56.07

Notes: Unweighted tabulations from NSFH3. Samples include NSFH3 focal child respondents (ages 5-18 at NSFH1) with valid data on NSFH1 family type.

Table 3. Association (Measured by Odds Ratios) between Family Type, Achievement, and Risk-Taking

	Intact-Middle Conflict	Intact-High conflict	Step	Single
Poor grades in high school	0.95	1.90 **	1.82 **	1.49 **
High school dropout	1.23	1.86 **	3.60 **	3.34 **
Early sex (before age 16)	1.20	1.45 **	2.46 **	1.96 **
Ever smoked	1.34 *	1.38 *	1.95 **	1.40 **
Binge drinking past month	1.42 **	1.45 **	1.10	1.09
Ever tried marijuana	1.31 *	1.92 **	2.30 **	1.50 **

Notes: * p<.10; ** p<.05. Results are based on logistic regression models controlling only family type and age of focal child at NSFH1 (age parameters not shown). Odds ratios are estimated based on the the contrast category of low conflict intact families. Samples include NSFH3 focal child respondents (ages 5-18 at NSFH1) with valid data on NSFH1 family type and NSFH3 outcome.

Table 4. Association (Measured by Odds Ratios) between Family Type, Achievement, and Risk-Taking -- Younger Focal Children in Intact Families at NSFH1

	Model 1	Model 2	
	Separation t1-t2	Separation t1-t2	High Conflict at t1
Poor grades in high school	2.16 **	2.02 **	1.85 **
High school dropout	1.97 *	1.92 *	1.28
Early sex (before age 16)	1.32	1.28	1.24
Ever smoked	2.05 **	2.05 **	0.98
Binge drinking past month	1.20	1.19	1.01
Ever tried marijuana	1.61 *	1.52	1.67 **

Notes: * p<.10; ** p<.05. Results are based on logistic regression models controlling only family type and age of focal child at NSFH1 (age parameters not shown). Odds ratios are estimated based on the the contrast category of still intact. Samples include NSFH3 focal child respondents (ages 5-18 at NSFH1) in intact families at NSFH1 (*N* =596, of whom 68 experienced a separation between NSFH1 and NSFH2).