

The Effect of Family Structure on Raising a Healthy Child

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ABSTRACT

The instability of family structure has become an increasingly salient part of children's lives in the United States over the past half-century. During this period, as is well-known, divorce rates increased, as did the prevalence of nonmarital cohabitation, which is less stable than marriage. Moreover, cohabitation and marriage appear to be more unstable in the United States than in most other developed countries; and a relatively high percentage of American children experience transitions into single-parent families and stepfamilies. A growing body of literature suggests that children who experience multiple transitions in family structure may fare worse developmentally than children raised in stable two-parent families and perhaps even than children raised in stable, single-parent families. A child born to a single parent might be as well off, or perhaps even better off, if the parent did not cohabit or remarry. This research presents the instability hypothesis, selection hypothesis and the effects of family chaos on child upbringing.

Keywords: Family, Cohabitation, Parents separation, Child outcomes, Adoption.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades or so, a significant literature has developed on the impact of family structure and family change on child wellbeing. This literature documents an accumulating body of evidence that children raised in different family contexts display differential patterns of outcomes across a wide range of developmental domains. In particular, children raised in lone-parent families have been found, on average, to do less well across a range of measures of wellbeing than their peers in two-parent families, while parental separation has been found to be associated with an array of adverse outcomes for children. Behind these patterns of associations between family contexts and child outcomes, however, lies a complex web of overlapping and interacting influences, which means that interpreting these results is far from straightforward.

The instability of family structure has become an increasingly salient part of children's lives in the our society over the past half-century. During this period, as is well-known, divorce rates increased [1], as did the prevalence of nonmarital cohabitation, which is less stable than

marriage [2]. Moreover, cohabitation and marriage appear to be more unstable in the United States than in most other developed countries; and a relatively high percentage of American children experience transitions into single-parent families and stepfamilies [3]; [4].

A growing body of literature suggests that children who experience multiple transitions in family structure may fare worse developmentally than children raised in stable two-parent families and perhaps even than children raised in stable, single-parent families. This body of research presents what we call the *instability hypothesis*, the prediction that children are affected by disruption and changes in family structure as much as (or even more than) by the type of family structures they experience. If this hypothesis were true, it would suggest that a significant reinterpretation of the effects of family structure on children's well-being may be warranted. For example, it would imply that a child born to a single parent might be as well off, or perhaps even better off, if the parent did not cohabit or remarry.

However, most empirical tests of the instability hypothesis have neglected an alternative explanation. The association between multiple transitions and negative child outcomes does not necessarily imply that the former causes the latter. In fact, multiple transitions and negative child outcomes may be associated with each other through common causal factors reflected in the parents' antecedent behaviors and attributes. We call this explanation the *selection hypothesis*. A test of the instability hypothesis versus the selection hypothesis would therefore be of interest to sociologists in several sub-disciplines: family sociology, with its emphasis on family and household structure; the sociology of children and youth, with its concern for children's well-being; life course studies, which emphasize the long-term effects of early events on individuals' later lives; the sociology of crime and deviance, which includes studies of the early antecedents of anti-social behavior; and the sociology of education, with its interest in the determinants of academic achievement [5] [6] [7].

Theoretical Mechanisms

Although the statement that multiple transitions disrupt family functioning in ways that affect children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes is plausible, it does not explain the mechanisms through which instability, if indeed it has a causal effect, operates [8] [9]. Similarly, the claim that a selection effect functions through parents' antecedent behaviors and attributes offers little guidance about the pathways through which it operates. While there is no consensus on the mechanisms behind these potential effects, one can draw some theoretical inferences from the research literature.

Instability Effects

The theoretical case for an instability effect rests on the proposition that each of the transitions of parents, partners, and stepparents into and out of the household requires adjustments that can be stressful, at least initially, for the biological parent and the children, and that the cumulative effect on children's well-being can be substantial. The nature

of the transition in terms of changes in household composition is less relevant than the stress associated with moving from one form to another [10] [11]. To illustrate, many studies have shown that a child's transition from a two-parent family to a single-parent family is associated with lower school engagement, poorer cognitive achievement, and more behavior and emotional problems. One might think that a second transition that adds a stepparent or cohabiting partner would boost children's well-being, since it brings another adult and, usually, more income into the household [12].

But most studies show that children whose parents have remarried do not have higher levels of well-being than children in single-parent families [13]. Their levels of behavior problems, for example, are similar to children in single-parent families and higher than children in two-biological-parent families [14]. While many explanations have been suggested, the most common, according to the leading review article, are variants of stress models [15]. The addition of the stepparent is said to increase stress among children and adults, as families adjust to new routines, as the biological parent focuses attention on the new partnership, or as stepchildren come into conflict with the stepparent. This increased stress could cause children to have more emotional problems or to perform worse in school. Thus, it could potentially have effects on behavioral or cognitive outcomes.

Selection Effects

Theorizing about selection effects is more straightforward, although the research evidence is still modest. The basic proposition is that parents' personality characteristics and cognitive abilities have two effects: First, they affect the characteristics of their children, through the environment in the home, through genetic transmission, or more likely a combination of both. Second, they affect the parents' abilities to maintain stable intimate partnerships. Consequently, family instability and children's well-being co-vary but are not causally related. As an example of research in this genre, consider a behavioral genetic study of the

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effects of divorce on children, in which [16] compared the adjustment of children in two-parent and divorced biological and adoptive families. They reasoned that differences in the experience of divorce between children in biological families, on the one hand, and adoptive families, on the other hand, would likely reflect what they called “passive genotype-environment correlations” - the tendency for parents to transmit genetic traits to their children and to provide environmental experiences consistent with those traits - in the biological-parent families but not the adoptive parent families.

Using a matched sample of about 200 adoptive families and 200 biological families in Colorado, they found some evidence that children’s lower academic achievement, self-esteem, and competence in divorced families reflected genetic factors but that children’s higher psychopathology in divorced families appeared to be environmental in origin.

Another oft-cited study of the effects of multiple family structure transitions on children’s development found that for a sample of boys from one metropolitan area, mothers’ antecedent “antisocial behavior” mediated the association between transitions and the boys’ adjustment, academic performance, and delinquent behavior in sixth grade [17]. But in a later study of the same group of boys, [18] found a positive, significant association between parental transitions and sexual initiation that was only partially mediated when parental antisocial behavior was included in the model.

The earlier study suggests that diminished parenting skills and diminished relationship skills may covary, creating the appearance of a causal relationship between multiple transitions and some dimensions of children’s adjustment when, in fact, parental vulnerabilities cause both the transitions and the adjustment difficulties. Yet the study is based on a small sample of boys of limited diversity from one metropolitan area [19], and the evidence is not consistent across outcomes.

Parental Separation and Child Outcomes

Parental separation has been reported in the literature as being associated with a wide range of adverse effects on children’s wellbeing, both as a short-term consequence of the transition and in the form of more enduring effects that persist into adulthood. Effects reported include adverse impacts on cognitive capacity, schooling, physical health, mental and emotional health, social conduct and behaviour, peer relations, criminal offending, cigarette smoking, substance use, early departure from home, early-onset sexual behaviour and teenage pregnancy. A further range of impacts in early adulthood and beyond include higher rates of early childbearing, early marriage, marital dissolution, lone parenthood, low occupational status, economic hardship, poor-quality relationships with parents, unhappiness, discontentment with life, mistrust in others, and reduced longevity.

On the face of it, this seems like a long and forlorn listing, which suggests that parental separation bears down heavily on children and blights their lives to a significant degree across all domains of functioning. Yet the picture is not as bleak as this litany of problems might suggest. In most cases the size of the reported effects is small; minorities of children are negatively affected, generally only in the presence of other exacerbating factors; and in many cases the existence of a causal connection is contested and other competing explanations for these associations have been put forward. In other words, it is important to be cautious in interpreting the meaning of these patterns of association.

Many scholars who have identified associations between family structure and family change and child outcomes have drawn attention to the relatively small size of the effects. [20] describe the effect sizes they measured as “modest”, while [21] refer to effects that were “very weak”. [22] report that the proportion of variation in outcome measures that could be attributed to marital dissolution was generally small, never amounting to more than 3%. The modest nature of the associations between separation and

children's outcomes means that knowing that a child comes from a separated family, and knowing nothing else about the child, has little predictive power in terms of the child's wellbeing. There is a wide diversity of outcomes among both groups of children from divorced and intact families, and the adjustment of children following divorce depends on a wide range of other factors.

[23] note that "the differences in adolescent well-being within family types are greater than the differences *across* family types, suggesting that family processes are more important than family composition". Indeed, [24] showed that differences in adjustment between children within the same family are as great as, and even slightly greater than, differences between children in different families. [25] note further that measures of family relations explained the largest proportion of variance in adolescent wellbeing.

The majority of children whose parents have divorced function within normal or average limits in the years after divorce [26]. As a group, they cannot be characterised as "disturbed". Furthermore, there is a considerable range of functioning within both groups of children from divorced and intact families. Among children whose parents have divorced are many who are functioning quite well, while among children from intact families are many with major adjustment problems. In short, there is no one-to-one relationship between divorce and psychological adjustment problems in children. In fact, not only do some children do well despite the divorce of their parents, but some children actually benefit from the divorce. [27] note that adolescents living in single-parent families can "acquire certain strengths, notably a sense of responsibility, as a consequence of altered family routines". It is likely, however, that such benefits will accrue only where the altered routines are structured and predictable.

Remarriage and Child Outcomes

Remarriage does not generally improve outcomes for children, despite the potential gains from both improved economic circumstances and the presence of an additional adult to help with parenting tasks. Indeed, some studies have shown children to be worse off after a parent's remarriage. [28] found that having a stepfather had a deleterious effect on children's behaviour scores. [29] found that, among children who had experienced a parental separation, those whose parents reconciled or whose mother remarried exhibited more behavioural difficulties than children who remained in a single-parent family. [30] found that, although divorce was not negatively related to mothers' reports of children's behavioural and emotional problems, remarriage was.

It appears, then, that there is something about the complexity of family life in stepfamilies that hinders them from benefiting from the additional resources that are available when a lone mother remarries. Relationships within stepfamilies are complex and need time and goodwill on all sides to work well. Unlike the relationship between mother and stepfather, that between stepfather and stepchild is not a relationship of choice, which means that goodwill may sometimes be in short supply, at least in the early stages of establishing a stepfamily. Children are often suspicious of their mothers' new partners and slow to open up to the benefits the new relationship might confer on them, while stepfathers are often uncertain about how to respond to the children of their new partner [31]. Typically, this uncertainty results in lower levels of involvement: as [32] note, stepfathers appear to actively refrain from becoming involved with their stepchildren, engaging in both fewer positive and fewer negative behaviours. Perhaps as a result, cohesion remains lower among stepfamilies than among intact families [3]. Even so, improvements in stepfamily functioning are evident over time [15], which suggests that many families manage to master the challenges they face.

CONCLUSION

There is an abundance of evidence that children who experience a parental separation are, on average, worse off than their peers in intact families, on a number of measures of wellbeing. However, the scale of the differences in wellbeing between the two groups of children is not large and most children are not adversely affected. Parental separation then bears down most heavily on a minority of children, generally in the presence of other exacerbating factors. Underlying these effects are multiple mechanisms: income declines following separation,

declines in the mental health of custodial mothers, interparental conflict and compromised parenting. These mechanisms do not operate independently, but are related in complex ways. For example, income declines following separation place mother-headed households at risk of material and economic deprivation, which can take a toll on mothers' mental health. This in turn can lead to compromised parenting behaviours. All of these factors can impact adversely on child wellbeing.

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