

Diverse Pathways into Stepfamilies and the Emotional Well-Being of Adolescents

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Extended Abstract

Although approximately one-third of all children born in the United States in the early 1980s are expected to spend some time in a married or cohabiting stepfamily (Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995), the implications of parental remarriage for the well-being of youth are not well understood. There are many reasons to expect a mother's (re)marriage or union formation to improve the lives of children. For example, remarriage is associated with substantial improvement in the economic well-being of women and their children after a marital dissolution (Holden and Smock 1991; Peterson 1996). This is important, as economic deprivation is thought to be a central explanation for the disadvantage associated with growing up with a single parent (Furstenberg 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Stepfamily formation also introduces a second parental figure into the household, increasing opportunities for the monitoring and supervision of children, and may bring a same-sex (or opposite-sex) role model into the home. In addition, a stepparent may offer much needed emotional support to an overextended single parent (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994).

Yet a growing body of evidence suggests that stepfamilies may not tend to benefit children (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000). Living in a stepfamily is associated with low well-

being relative to living with two biological parents, as indicated by a wide range of child outcomes including educational attainment, sociability, initiative, internalizing and externalizing behaviors (e.g. Amato and Keith 1991; Astone and McLanahan 1991; Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994; Coughlin and Vuchinich 1996; Hetherington, Bridges, and Insabella 1998; Pagani et al. 1998; Sandefur, McLanahan, and Wojtkiewicz 1992; Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994). Yet children in stepfamilies may differ from those in two biological parent families in many ways beyond the exchange of a biological parent for a step-parent, such as having experienced marital disruption or having spent time living with a single parent. Such differences can make comparisons between children living in stepfamilies and those living in intact families difficult to interpret. If one's goal is to gain insight into how stepfamilies affect youth well-being, comparisons between youth in stepfamilies and those in single-parent families would seem more appropriate. The more limited body of work that does compare outcomes in stepfamilies to those in single-parent families suggests that children living in stepfamilies may be at relatively greater risk for some negative outcomes, such the likelihood of experiencing poor psychological adjustment, developmental difficulties, early sexual behavior, or having a premarital birth (Amato 1994; Amato and Keith 1991; Coiro, Zill, and Bloom 1994; Dawson 1991; Musick and Bumpass 1998; Wu and Martinson 1993; Wu 1996; Zill 1988, 1994).

Research by developmental psychologist E. Mavis Hetherington and colleagues provides some of the strongest evidence to date that children in stepfamilies tend not to fare as well as those in intact two-parent families, and at best, do no better on average than those living with single-divorced mothers (e.g. see Hetherington and Jodl 1994, for a useful review). The samples analyzed in these studies, however, tend to be non-population based and to under-represent minorities and poor children (Brooks-Gunn 1994). In addition, many previous studies of family-

structure effects on child well-being have failed to clearly define “stepfamilies.” This is important, as these families may be preceded either by a marital dissolution or a non-marital birth -- pathways which may have very different implications for the well-being of children. Although approximately one-third of all children are currently born outside of marriage in the United States (Ventura et al. 1999), little is known about the well-being of youth in stepfamilies formed through the latter route (Brooks-Gunn 1994). Furthermore, stepfamilies may form either through cohabitation or through marriage. While a growing body of research suggests that youth in cohabiting families tend not to fare as well as those living with two biological parents, less work has carefully examined outcomes across different types of stepfamilies, or has made theoretically appropriate comparisons between youth in stepfamilies of various types and those living with a single parent (e.g. Brown 2004; Manning and Lamb 2003; Nelson, Clark, and Acs 2001; Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994).

The current research investigates the association between stepfamilies and the emotional well-being of adolescents, using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. This work offers several important extensions on previous research, including distinguishing stepfamilies formed after divorce from those formed after a nonmarital birth, and stepfamilies formed through marriage from those formed through cohabitation. I also explore potential mechanisms underlying observed relationships between stepfamilies and adolescent well-being, testing several major hypotheses suggested by theory. For example, I ask whether family income can explain the observed relationship between stepfamilies and adolescent emotional well-being, as predicted by the economic deprivation perspective. I ask whether parental involvement or monitoring can explain this relationship, as predicted by the socialization / social control perspective. I ask whether the total number of family transitions or

the duration of the current family structure can explain this relationship, as predicted by the stress and instability perspective. I ask whether recent residential mobility can explain this relationship, as predicted by the community connections perspective. Finally, I ask whether mothers' own characteristics can explain the relationship between stepfamilies and the well-being of her child, thus offering a limited test of whether selection contributes to observed differences across family structures in adolescent outcomes.

DATA AND METHODS

This research relies on data from the 1994-95 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). The Add Health provides measures of emotional well-being of adolescents and also contains extensive marital histories of parents. The Add Health sample includes interviews with a core nationally representative sample of over 12,000 adolescents in grades 7 through 12 (Bearman, Jones, and Udry 1997). These data also contain over-samples of selected populations, including 1,038 blacks from well-educated families (with a parent with a college degree). The response rate for the survey was relatively high, with 78.9 percent of eligible adolescents responding. Because the Add Health employed a complex sampling design, which included oversampling of selected populations and clustering of observations within schools, appropriate sampling weights are applied to all analyses and standard errors are corrected for design effects using STATA.

I place several restrictions on my analytical sub-sample. First, the sample is limited to children whose biological mothers completed a residential parent questionnaire. This is important, because the vast majority of children still live with their mothers after divorce, and children who live with fathers after divorce (or with neither biological / adoptive parent) are still

a select group, complicating analyses of family structure effects on children (Cancian and Meyer 1998; Seltzer 1994). Second, I limit the sample to adolescents born after 1976, because parents are only asked about their marital histories since 1977. Third, because parental death is shown to have qualitatively different effects on child outcomes than other types of parental marital transitions (Amato and Keith 1991; McLanahan 1997), the sample is limited to adolescents who have not experienced the death of their biological father or their mother's widowhood. Fourth, I limit our sample to youth ages 12 or older at the time of interview. Youth under age 12 are not normally in the seventh grade and were likely promoted due to achievement. Due to sample size restrictions, I further limit the sample to white and African American adolescents. Finally, I limit our sample to respondents with non-missing data on items used to measure emotional well-being and on key explanatory variables such as levels of parental involvement, recent residential mobility, and mother's age at birth. The final analytical sample includes a total of 8,179 adolescent respondents.

Dependent Variables: To assess depression, I rely on a modified version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), which is shown to have high reliability in populations of adolescents (Radloff 1977, 1991). This measure is based on responses to 19 questions regarding experience of depressive symptomatology in the past week, including how often respondents felt: "bothered by things that don't usual bother you," "didn't feel like eating, your appetite was poor," "that you could not shake off the blues, even with help from your family and friends," "you were just as good as other people," "had trouble keeping your mind on what you were doing," "depressed," "you were too tired to do things," "hopeful about the future," "thought your life had been a failure," "fearful," "happy," "talked less than usual," "lonely," "people were unfriendly to you," "you enjoyed life," "sad," "people disliked you," "it

was hard to get started doing things,” and “life was not worth living.” After reverse coding four items, as described by Radloff (1977), each item was coded as follows: 0 “never or rarely,” 1 “sometimes,” 2 “a lot of the time,” and 3 “most of the time or all of the time.” The 19 items were then summed to compute each adolescent’s total CES-D score. Taking the natural log of the CES-D score reduced skew in the untransformed variable. A small constant of .01 was added to each CES-D score before transforming the variable to allow for zero values. The internal consistency of this measure in our analytic sample was high (Cronbach’s alpha = .86).

To measure suicide ideation, I rely on adolescents’ self-reports of whether they seriously thought about committing suicide during the past 12 months. I construct a binary variable coded one if they report having had such thoughts. Because of the sensitive nature of this information, adolescents listened to the pre-recorded question through earphones and entered their responses directly into a laptop computer.

Independent Variables: I measure family structure from the child’s perspective, using information on marital transitions reported by mothers which occurred after the birth of the adolescent respondent, and paying careful attention to variation within the categories of single-parent family and stepfamily. Specifically, current family structure is classified into eight categories: (1) married two biological parent family, (2) cohabiting two biological parent family, (3) non-cohabiting single mother – no divorce or separation experienced by child, (4) cohabiting single mother – no divorce or separation experienced by child, (5) non-cohabiting single mother – divorce or separation experienced, (6) cohabiting single mother – divorce or separation experienced, (7) mother / stepfather – no divorce experienced by child, and (8) mother / stepfather - divorce experienced by child.

I also construct several other independent variables to test specific hypotheses about the nature of the relationship between family structure and adolescent well-being, including family income, parental presence, parenting style, biological father's and mother's level of involvement, residential mobility, total number of lifetime family structure transitions, and duration in the current family structure. To test hypotheses regarding the selective characteristics of individuals entering stepfamilies, I construct a variety of measures related to the health and risk-taking behaviors of the biological mother.

Analytical Techniques: I use ordinary least square regression techniques for the analysis of depressive symptomatology and logistic regression for the analysis of suicide thoughts. In the first stage of the analysis, I establish a baseline relationship between emotional well-being and family structure, net only of basic demographic control variables. I next individually add each set of potential mediating measures to this baseline specification to test hypotheses regarding economic deprivation, social control, stress and instability, community connections, and selection as explanations for the observed relationship between stepfamilies and depression. Finally, I include all explanatory variables simultaneously in a single model to test their combined importance for explaining the relationship between stepfamilies and adolescent emotional well-being. For reasons previously described, I focus on theoretically appropriate comparisons between stepfamilies and single-parent families throughout the analysis.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Preliminary results from this research point to a complex relationship between stepfamilies and the emotional well-being of adolescents. I find positive effects of factors such as increased levels of family income and parental presence associated with living in a married

stepfamily rather than in a single-parent family, but also evidence of negative effects associated with stepfamilies, including (but not limited to) instability in children's family environments. Negative effects of stepfamilies on the emotional well-being of adolescents, however, appear to diminish over time since the union was formed.

This analysis is one piece of a larger project, and results will be placed in context of findings for other domains of adolescent well-being. For example, in other work, I find evidence of relatively *better* adolescent outcomes with respect to delinquency among youth living in stepfamilies than among those living in single-parent families. My results suggest that this association cannot be explained by adolescent problem behavior reducing mothers' likelihood of (re)marriage. Variation in the association between stepfamilies and adolescent outcomes across domains of well-being, and the implications of this broader picture for theoretical explanations of how stepfamilies ought to influence the well-being of youth, will be considered.

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