The Relative Effects of Family Instability and Mother/Partner Conflict on Children's Externalizing Behavior

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A growing body of research has found support for the idea that children's behavioral development and school performance may be influenced as much by multiple changes in family composition during childhood as by the quality and character of the families in which children reside at any given point (Cavanagh and Huston 2006; Cavanagh, Schiller, and Riegle-Crumb 2006; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Heard 2007a; Heard 2007b; Heaton and Forste 2007; Osborne and McLanahan 2007; Wu 1996; Wu and Martinson 1993; Wu and Thomson 2001). Much of the research on instability has focused specifically on the effects for children of experiencing the repeated formation and dissolution of cohabiting and marital unions. Underlying the research on the effects of union instability is the concept that children and their parents or parent-figures form a functioning family system, and repeated disruptions to that system, caused by either the addition or departure of a parent's partner or spouse, may lead to behaviors with potentially deleterious long-term consequences.

An alternative explanation for the effects of union instability on children's well-being is that children who experience multiple transitions in family structure also may be exposed to frequent conflict between parents and their partners prior to union dissolution, and the experience of conflict, rather than the experience of disruption to a functional system, undermines children's successful development. Exposure to parental conflict in a single union has been found to be associated with children's psychological and academic adjustment and the transition to

adulthood (Amato and Booth 1997; Amato and Sobolewski 2001; Musick and Bumpass 1999). We expect that exposure to repeated conflict in multiple unions may have a compounding negative effect on children's development.

Cause to investigate the effects of repeated exposure to parental conflict potentially associated with union instability arises from research on divorce, which has investigated the relative effects of pre-disruption parental conflict and eventual union dissolution on children's well-being. A substantial body of research indicates that parental conflict mediates the effect of divorce on children (Amato and Sobolewski 2001; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and McRae 1998; Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale, Kiernan, Robins, Morrison, and Teitler 1991); and that children whose parents exhibited high levels of conflict fare better after the parents' divorce compared to children who remain in high-conflict unions (Amato, Spencer Loomis, and Booth 1995; Booth and Amato 2001; Hanson 1999; Strohschein 2005; Sun 2001) (but see Morrison and Coiro 1999; Musick, Meier, and Bumpass 2006).

We use three waves of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ("Fragile Families Study") to investigate the behavioral development of children at age 3 as a function of maternal union stability and mother/partner conflict. We restrict our analysis to children born to mothers who are married to or cohabiting with the child's biological father (N=2,971 at baseline). To evaluate the effects of family structure transitions and conflicts, we compare children who have experienced either or both of these factors to children who have remained in low-conflict, stable cohabiting unions or marriages since birth.

The Fragile Families Study enables us to assess the effects of conflict and instability in the lives of very young children. Research in developmental psychology indicates that children are highly reactive to change in their immediate environments in the period from infancy to

preschool (e.g., Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov 1994); and children who are exposed to frequent instability and environmental stress in their early years may continue to accumulate destabilizing events throughout childhood. While much of the research on the effects of family structure change and conflict has focused on adolescence and late adulthood, the availability of the Fragile Families Study permits an investigation of how such experiences begin to shape children early on.

Data and Methods

The Fragile Families Study is a longitudinal birth cohort study including nearly 5,000 children born in 20 U.S. cities with populations of 200,000 or more between 1998 and 2000. Mothers of the children were interviewed in person within 48 hours of the child's birth and again when the children were 1 and 3 years old. (Families were also followed up when the children were age 5; those data will be publicly available in Summer 2008.) The response rate at baseline is 82 percent for unmarried mothers and 87 percent for married mothers. Eighty-two percent of all mothers participated at all three waves (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2005). When weighted (**N_FNLWT**), the data are representative of all births in large U.S. cities that occurred between 1998 and 2000.

Key independent variables

The Fragile Families Study includes information on mother's union status at each wave, and we compute measures of the number of union transitions the child has experienced (into or out of marriage or cohabitation) at each wave. By age 3 (the third wave of the study), it is possible that a child who resided with both biological parents at birth has experienced up to 4 recorded union transitions. The data do not include information on unions that formed and

dissolved between waves, so we may underestimate the total number of transitions a child has experienced. In addition, consistent with prior research using these data (Osborne and McLanahan 2007), we do not count a transition from cohabitation to marriage as a transition in this analysis because we are interested in the number of partnerships the mother forms or dissolves over this period.

At each wave, the Fragile Families Study also gathers data on sources of conflict between a child's mother and the biological father if she still resides with him or recently ended her union with him, and between a child's mother and her new partner, if relevant. The conflict items include questions such as how often the partner is fair and willing to compromise when they have a disagreement, insults or criticizes the mother, or tries to prevent the mother from seeing her friends and family. These items capture a variety of areas where negative mother/partner interactions may affect a child's well-being, either through the child's direct observation of conflict or through the influence of conflict on parenting style and parenting stress. The full list of conflict items is presented in Appendix 1.

We sum the individual conflict items to develop a scale score for each source of parental conflict. For each wave, we then sum the individual scales from the three possible sources of conflict that children have experienced: mother's conflict with biological father in ongoing relationship, mother's conflict with separated biological father before union ended, and mother's conflict with new partner. (At each wave, no child will experience more than two sources of conflict, i.e., conflict between the mother and separated father and the mother and current partner.) We re-scale the individual conflict items so that the absence of conflict is signified by a value of "0" to avoid the mathematical problem of necessarily having a higher score when summing reports for both former and current partners. Because the number of items in the

conflict scale changes at each wave, we standardize the summed scale scores from each wave and take the average of those standardized scores over three waves. This value represents the average amount of conflict a child has experienced between birth and age 3. We compute a measure of average exposure to conflict for all children whose mothers participated in all three survey waves.

From these data, we create a 6-category classification that combines children's family structure history and exposure to mother-partner conflict. Children's family structure history may fall into one of three mutually-exclusive categories: *stable,* where a child has resided with his/her biological parents from birth to age 3; *separated,* where a child continues to reside with his/her biological mother, but the child's father is no longer in the household by year 3; or *multiple transitions,* where the child's biological mother has re-partnered at least once by year 3. Children's exposure to mother-partner conflict may fall into one of two categories: *low,* meaning that the average amount of conflict the child has experienced is at or below the median for the distribution of exposure to conflict in the sample; or *high,* meaning that the average amount of conflict experienced is above the sample median. When combined, our 6 classifications of family structure history and exposure to conflict are stable, low-conflict; separated, low-conflict; multiple transitions, low-conflict; stable, high-conflict; separated, high-conflict; and multiple transitions, high-conflict.[1]

Dependent variable

The Fragile Families Study administers items from the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach 1992) to mothers when children are 36 months old in order to develop age-appropriate indicators of externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Because research has consistently found

[1] We initially tested a definition of exposure to high conflict using the 75th percentile, rather than the median, as the cutoff for high conflict. Results were similar.

that family structure instability is associated with externalizing behavior problems (Capaldi and Patterson 1991; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Osborne and McLanahan 2007), we focus on that outcome. Our summed score includes 22 items and has an alpha reliability score of .88. The variable is roughly normally distributed with a skewness statistic of .699.

Control variables

We control for parents' marital status at the child's birth (cohabiting vs. married) because martial unions are subject to less instability compared to cohabiting unions (Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004; Osborne, Manning, and Smock 2007). Mother's family transitions prior to her child's birth are represented by three attributes: whether she resided with both parents at age 15; whether she had prior births with another man; and the number or prior partners she reports (regardless of whether she cohabited with or was married to any of those partners). Because mother's mental health is related to children's behavioral development through genetic and environmental mechanisms, and because mother's mental health is known to bias reports of children's behavior, we control for mother's risk for depression using her report (from wave 3) of whether either of her parents was ever depressed for two weeks or more.[2] Mother's low-income status at the time of the child's birth is assessed based on whether the hospitalization and delivery were covered by Medicaid or other public assistance. Additional sociodemographic controls include mother's race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and age at child's birth, child's birth order and sex, and whether the child was a singleton or twin birth.

Weighted means and frequencies that describe sample attributes by family form and conflict exposure are summarized in Table 1. The table shows that children who are in non-intact

[2] If data on both parents' depression history is missing, we use the mother's own depression history, reported when her child was 1 year old. We do not rely exclusively on this measure, as we cannot determine whether an episode of depression preceded or followed the birth of the child in the study and therefore cannot make any causal interpretation about the relationship between mother's depression history and her child's externalizing behavior.

families with high exposure to conflict have higher externalizing behavior problems scores compared to children in non-intact families who have experienced low conflict. Children who live in stable unions have similar behavior problems scores, regardless of conflict level. Children whose mothers are separated or who have re-partnered were born less often to married parents compared to children whose parents remain together. Mothers who have separated or re-partnered less often have a college education, more often are non-Hispanic black, more often have had children with another father, and more often used Medicaid at the child's delivery compared to mothers remaining in stable unions. Mothers who report high levels of conflict less often have a college education and *more* often come from families that were intact at age 15 compared to mothers who report less conflict. Among stable unions, mothers who report high conflict more often used Medicaid at the child's birth compared to those who report low conflict. In contrast, separated or multipartnered mothers with low levels of conflict more often used Medicaid at their child's birth compared to mothers with high levels of conflict.

Sample and variable restrictions

Data on mother/partner conflict are available only for women in married or cohabiting relationships. As a result, our estimate of family structure change excludes transitions into or out of visiting relationships and other union types, and may underestimate all of the partner transitions to which children are exposed. This is particularly true for African-American mothers, who are less likely to cohabit or marry compared to Hispanic and non-Hispanic white mothers (Osborne and McLanahan 2007). Therefore, we recommend caution in interpreting our results as they pertain to African-American mothers and children, as those in married or cohabiting unions are not generally representative.

The conflict scale that we use is available at each wave. At wave 1 only, mothers also report on the frequency of arguments with biological fathers on a variety of topics. Arguments may represent a particularly acute form of conflict between parents to which young children may be especially sensitive. Because indicators of argument frequency are not available across waves or for partners other than the child's biological father, we are unable to compare directly the relative effects of acute and more generalized conflict on children's externalizing behavior. In analyses not included here, we found that argument frequency at wave 1 significantly reduced the effect of cumulative exposure to conflict, suggesting that the two concepts are strongly related in terms of their influence on child well-being.

Analytic Strategy

We use ordinary least-squares regression to estimate a child's externalizing behavior score as a function of the characteristics described above. Specifically, we develop an analytic model that assesses the effects of family structure change and exposure to conflict on externalizing behavior problems at age 3, given that the child resided with the biological father at birth. We make our assessment by comparing children who have experienced high conflict and/or family structure change to children who have remained with parents in stable, low-conflict unions since birth. Our analytic sample is restricted to children whose mothers participated in all three waves of the study and who provided complete information on the variables included in the analysis N=1,474).[3]

Results

Table 2 presents unweighted frequencies and percentages for each of our six categories of children's family structure history and exposure to conflict. The table indicates that 47.15

[3] Mean imputation is used in the measure of age at child's birth (N=5). See note 1 regarding imputed values on the measure of depression history (N=272).

percent of children born to married or cohabiting mothers remain with both parents in a low-conflict union by age 3. Almost 20 percent of children reside with both parents in a high-conflict union. Children whose mothers have separated or re-partnered are more likely to have been exposed to high levels of conflict: the number of children whose mothers have separated and who have experienced high levels of conflict is about 80 percent larger than the number of children with separated mothers who have been exposed to low levels of conflict, and nearly 5 times as many children with multi-partnered mothers have experienced high levels of conflict compared to children in the same family structure status who have experienced low levels of conflict. These data suggest that family structure instability and mother/partner conflict are likely to co-occur, although stable unions are not immune from mother/partner conflict.

Table 3 presents results from ordinary least-squares regressions predicting children's externalizing behavior problems scores. Model 1 includes only the 6-category indicator of family structure type and conflict exposure and a dummy variable indicating whether the child's parents were married (compared to cohabiting) at the child's birth. The excluded category from the family structure/conflict measure refers to children in stable, low-conflict unions. The model indicates that predicted externalizing behavior problem scores are significantly higher for children who have been exposed to high levels of conflict, regardless of family transition history: the coefficients associated with residing in a stable, separated, or multiple transition family structure with a history of exposure to a high level of conflict each have a value around 2, indicating that children's externalizing behavior scores are predicted to be about 2 points higher (or about one-quarter of a standard deviation) compared to children in low-conflict, stable unions. Coefficients for high-conflict stable or separated family forms are statistically significant at the .001 level; the coefficient for high-conflict multiple-partner family forms is significant at

the .05 level. There is no statistically significant effect of family structure change (separation or multiple transitions) for children who have been exposed to low levels of conflict.

Model 2 includes control variables. The effect of high exposure to conflict is attenuated for all groups, but the effect is reduced below statistical significance only among children whose mothers have made multiple transitions (β(high-conflict/multiple transitions)=1.2, p=.18). The effect of exposure to high mother/partner conflict with a separated mother is significant at the .01 level (β =1.59), and the effect of exposure to high mother/partner conflict in a stable union remains statistically significant at the .001 level (β =1.85). Stepwise regressions (not shown here) indicate that attenuating effects for all groups result primarily from controlling for family depression history and multi-partner fertility; additionally, college education and age at child's birth attenuate the effect of residing in a high-conflict, stable union and Medicaid status at the child's birth attenuates the effect of residing in a high-conflict, multiple-transition family form.

Discussion

Our analysis indicates that exposure to conflict, more so than family structure transitions, has a deleterious effect on young children's behavioral development. Children who have been exposed to a high level of cumulative conflict by age 3 have higher predicted externalizing behavior problem scores compared to children in low-conflict stable unions, regardless of family structure history. Children in non-intact families who have been exposed to low levels of conflict, in contrast, do not have significantly different predicted externalizing behavior problem scores compared to children in low-conflict, stable unions. It is important to note, however, that relationship instability often co-occurs with exposure to high levels of conflict. Our research highlights the importance of measuring family process as a precursor to union dissolution and as

a by-product of adjustment to union formation in order to explain why family structure instability is associated with negative child outcomes.

In our baseline model, the magnitude of the effect of exposure to high conflict is constant across union types. With control variables, the effect of exposure to high conflict among children with separated mothers or mothers who have experienced multiple transitions is attenuated. This suggests that factors like maternal distress, a history of multipartner fertility, and low income contribute to conflict in the context of union dissolution, while high conflict in stable unions has distinctive causes.

Our results suggest that the mechanisms that spur family structure transitions, and especially union dissolution, vary depending on mother/partner conflict, and those mechanisms may have different consequences for children. Our descriptive findings offer a hint of an explanation – women who report low conflict and who are no longer with their child's biological father more often were low-income at the child's birth, and among multipartnered mothers, those with lower conflict have lower educational attainment. Perhaps unions that dissolve as a result of economic stress are distinctive in their consequences for children compared to those that end because of interpersonal conflict.

Our findings pertain to very young children, who may be more vulnerable to exposure to mother/partner conflict than to family structure transitions. Parental conflict may provoke immediate stress responses that manifest as behavior problems, while family structure transitions may have less immediate impact, especially if extended kin are available to support parents with young children. Therefore, the effect of conflict relative to family structure transitions may be greater for young children compared to older children.

Our study does have some limitations. As previously described, the lack of data on conflict in non co-resident unions causes systematic exclusion of union transitions by race/ethnicity. In addition, unions that occurred between waves are not captured, so that the total number of union transitions a child has experienced may be underestimated, and short-term unions also may be systematically underrepresented.

We propose two extensions to the current research. First, the effect of exposure to high conflict between mothers and partners may be lessened for children who have positive relationships with their parents. In other words, parents who engage in conflict may have generally poor communication skills that contribute jointly to family structure instability and to children's externalizing behavior problems. Accounting for parenting style and other indicators of parent-child relationship quality will isolate the effect of mother/partner conflict on children's development.

Second, we anticipate that our measure of average conflict exposure may be insufficient to capture how children respond to conflict. Rather, the duration, timing, intensity, and source of conflict (whether with the biological father or another partner) may characterize the exposure to conflict in ways that explain variation in how children respond. Therefore, we will develop supplemental models that capture dimensions of exposure beyond average intensity.

The findings from this analysis have important implications for policies aimed at increasing the stability of families through providing relationship skills training. Improving the communication patterns among couples is an important first step, but the programs may need to go further to improve the quality of these relationships, and they should focus on married and cohabiting couples in addition to unmarried couples. Limiting a child's exposure to parents' conflict may have positive benefits on the child's socio-emotional development.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics (weighted), children living with both parents at birth

	Overall		Stable, low-conflict		Stable, high-conflict		Separated, low-conflict		Separated, high-conflict		Multiple transitions, low-conflict		Multiple transitions, high-conflict	
	Mean/prop.	SD	Mean/prop.	SD	Mean/prop.	SD	Mean/prop.	SD	Mean/prop.	SD	Mean/prop.	SD	Mean/prop.	SD
Dependent variable														
Child's externalizing behavior problems score (range=0-44)	11.83	0.46	11.42	0.57	11.32	1.31	12.74	0.88	14.50	1.10	9.99	2.59	12.84	0.92
Independent variables														
Married (vs. cohabiting) at birth	0.67		0.79		0.78		0.04		0.31		0.00		0.50	
Mother's educational attainment														
less than high school	0.24		0.17		0.31		0.25		0.39		0.08		0.48	
High school graduate/GED	0.32		0.30		0.27		0.49		0.34		0.91		0.35	
Some college	0.19		0.19		0.18		0.23		0.21		0.01		0.17	
College graduate or more	0.25		0.34		0.24		0.03		0.06		0.00		0.00	
Mother's race/ethnicity														
Hispanic, any race	0.31		0.32		0.36		0.19		0.32		0.00		0.10	
Non-Hispanic white	0.35		0.42		0.29		0.11		0.25		0.07		0.24	
Non-Hispanic black	0.25		0.15		0.25		0.69		0.41		0.93		0.63	
Non-Hispanic other race	0.09		0.11		0.10		0.01		0.02		0.00		0.03	
History of depression	0.35		0.34		0.41		0.32		0.33		0.04		0.43	
Mother's family/partner history														
Has children with another father	0.23		0.18		0.17		0.41		0.35		0.37		0.68	
No. of other romantic partners ever	2.57	0.17	2.72	0.25	2.74	0.39	1.95	0.29	2.08	0.24	0.78	0.54	2.24	0.68
Family of origin intact at 15	0.53		0.54		0.67		0.24		0.42		0.06		0.51	
Attributes of birth														
Mother's age at child's birth	28.22	0.37	28.86	0.47	29.69	0.86	24.86	0.52	25.68	0.63	20.91	1.49	23.49	0.52
Child's birth order	2.11	0.06	1.98	0.07	2.23	0.16	2.37	0.24	2.29	0.15	2.35	1.18	2.46	0.26
Child is male (vs. female singleton)	0.55		0.60		0.52		0.56		0.42		0.17		0.38	
Mother had twins (vs. female singleton)	0.02		0.01		0.03		0.02		0.03		0.02		0.00	
Hospitalization/delivery covered by Medicaid	0.47		0.38		0.51		0.80		0.55		0.94		0.73	
	1474		695		276		146		265		17		75	

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, Baseline to Year 3

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages, 6-category classification of family structure history
and exposure to mother-partner conflict among children living with both parents at birth

	Family structure history			
Mother-partner Conflict	Stable	Separated	Multiple Transitions	Row Total
Low-conflict	695 (47.15)	146 (9.91)	17 (1.15)	858 (58.21)
High-conflict	276 (18.72)	265 (17.98)	75 (5.09)	676 (41.79)
Column Total	971	411	92	1474

Source: Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, Baseline to Year 3

Table 3. Coefficients and standard errors from OLS regression estimates of child's externalizing behavior score at age 3, Fragile Families Study (children born to cohabiting or married parents only)

	Model 1 b/se		Model 2 b/se	
Stability/conflict interaction (vs. stable low-conflict)				
Stable, high conflict	2.01	***	1.85	***
	0.51		0.51	
Separated, low conflict	0.22		0.25	
	0.68		0.69	
Separated, high conflict	1.98	***	1.59	**
	0.54		0.54	
Multiple trans, low conflict	-0.63		-0.73	
	1.77		1.77	
Multiple trans, high conflict	2.00	*	1.20	
	0.88		0.90	
Married at birth (vs. cohabiting)	-2.16	***	-1.28	*
	0.41		0.50	
Educational attainment (vs. high school grad/GED)				
< HS			0.09	
			0.51	
Some college			-0.40	
			0.51	
College or more			-0.91	
			0.70	
Ethnicity (vs. non-Hispanic white)				
Hispanic, any race			0.00	
			0.55	
Non-Hispanic black			-0.42	
			0.51	
Non-Hispanic other			-0.62	
			0.94	
Mother/father depressed			2.12	***
			0.40	
Depression history imputed (see note)			0.92	†
			0.52	
Prior family transitions				
R had any child with another man			0.62	
			0.48	
# of partners R has had			0.08	
			0.07	
R's family intact at 15			0.30	
			0.43	
Attributes of birth				
Mother's age at child's birth			-0.06	
			0.04	
Child's birth order			0.10	
			0.20	
Child is male (vs. singleton female)			1.00	**
			0.37	
R had twins (vs. singleton female)			-0.20	
			1.24	
R used Medicaid/other public aid at delivery			0.55	

			0.46	
Intercept	12.63	***	12.00	***
	0.36		1.17	
R-squared				
N	1474		1474	

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

Note: Family history of depression is imputed using R's own general depression report when her child is 1 year old.

Appendix 1. Questions about mother/partner conflict, Fragile Families Study, waves 1 to 3

Thinking about your relationship with (baby's father/current partner), how often would you say that: (0=often, 1=sometimes, 2=never)

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
He is fair and willing to compromise when you have a disagreement, would you say often (0), sometimes (1), or never (2)?	X	X	X
He hits or slaps you when he is angry?*	X		
He expresses affection or love for you?	X	X	X
He insults or criticizes you or your ideas?*	X	X	X
He encourages or helps you to do things that are important to you?	X	X	X
He tries to keep you from seeing or talking with your friends or family*		X	X
He tries to prevent you from going to work or school*		X	X
He withholds money, makes you ask for money, or takes your money*		X	X
He slaps or kicks you*		X	X
He hits you with his first or an object that could hurt you*		X	X
He tries to make you have sex or do sexual things you don't want to do*		X	X
He listens to you when you need someone to talk to		X	X
He really understands your hurts and joys		X	X

*=Reverse-coded for analysis