

INFLUENCES OF FAMILY STRUCTURE, CONFLICT, AND CHANGE ON TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

Kelly Musick
University of Southern California

Ann Meier
University of Minnesota

Larry Bumpass
University of Wisconsin-Madison

BACKGROUND

- Increased interest in marriage
- Research on conflict within families
- Important to understand *how* families matter for children

PRIOR RESEARCH

- Conflict explains divorce effect (Furstenberg and Teitler, Cherlin et al, Hanson)
- Conflict conditions divorce effect – stress relief hypothesis (Amato et al., Jekielek, Strohschein)
- Independent effect of conflict (Morrison & Coiro, Amato and Booth, Amato and Sobolewski)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Is living with two continuously married parents better for kids, even in case of persistent conflict?
 - How do high conflict married, step and single-parent families compare?
 - Does conflict explain or condition divorce?

OUR STUDY

- Attention to variation and change in family
- Critical period of adolescence
- Range of young adult outcomes
- Information on conflict from both parents
- 3 waves of data

DATA

- National Survey of Families & Households
 - NSFH1 (1987-88): main R & partner
 - NSFH2 (1992-94): parents + 2500 focal children
 - NSFH3 (2001-02): parents + 1950 focal children
- Younger focals:
 - Ages 4-11 at NSFH1, at home NSFH1 & NSFH2
- Older focals:
 - Ages 12-18 at NSFH1, at home NSFH1

SAMPLES

- Adolescent family type
 - Focals living with bio mother, N =1597
 - Family measured at NSFH1 for older focals, NSFH2 for younger
- Trajectories of change
 - Younger focals only, continuously married family at NSFH1, N = 562
 - Stability & change in family structure & conflict NSFH1-NSFH2

FAMILY MEASURES

- Continuously married, step, single
- Marital conflict
 - Both parents' reports
 - Disagreement in household tasks, money, time together, sex, children & in-laws
 - Scores averaged & grouped into low, medium & high

OUTCOMES

- Academic achievement (logit):
 - Drop out, poor grades, no college attendance
- Substance use (logit):
 - Smoking, heavy drinking, marijuana use
- Family transitions (Cox hazards):
 - Early sex, early cohabitation, nonmarital birth, union dissolution

CONTROLS

- Focal child's:
 - gender
 - age
- Mother's:
 - race
 - highest level of education
 - childhood family structure
 - age at first birth
 - union dissolution prior to focal's birth

ADOLESCENT FAMILY TYPE

- Family measure 10-18 → outcomes 19-34
- Family type:
 - 16% low conflict
 - 19% middle conflict
 - 21% high conflict
 - 21% step
 - 23% single-parent

Adolescent Family Type and Young Adult Outcomes

	Drop Out	Poor Grades	No College Attendance	
Panel A: Academic Achievement				
High conflict	2.29 **	1.62 **	1.04	
Stepfamily	3.53 ***	1.64 **	1.24	
Single-parent family	4.52 ***	1.72 **	1.39 *	
Panel B: Substance Use				
	Current Smoking	Heavy Drinking	Recent Marijuana	
High conflict	1.52 **	1.78 ***	1.40	
Stepfamily	2.10 ***	1.28	1.50 *	
Single-parent family	2.33 ***	1.39 *	1.48 *	
Panel C: Family Transitions				
	First Sex by Age 16	Cohabitation by Age 21	Nonmarital Fertility	Union Dissolution
High conflict	1.70 *	1.66 **	1.40	1.53 **
Stepfamily	1.96 **	2.15 ***	1.50	1.37 *
Single-parent family	2.19 ***	2.48 ***	1.79 **	1.72 ***

TRAJECTORIES OF CHANGE

- Conflict 4-11 → separation by 10-17 → outcomes 19-26
- Trajectories:
 - 47% low-low conflict
 - 12% low-high conflict
 - 10% high-low conflict
 - 18% high-high conflict
 - 7% low conflict-disruption
 - 5% high conflict-disruption

Trajectories of Family Change and Young Adult Outcomes

	Drop Out	Poor Grades	No College Attendance
Panel A: Academic Achievement			
Low-high conflict	1.57	1.16	1.00
High-low conflict	1.31	2.02 *	1.17
High-high conflict	2.24 *	2.23 ***	1.93 **
Low conflict-disruption	2.23	2.13 **	1.47
High conflict-disruption	2.73	3.21 **	2.10 *
Panel B: Substance Use			
	Current Smoking	Heavy Drinking	Recent Marijuana
Low-high conflict	1.45	0.83	0.96
High-low conflict	1.55	1.21	1.66
High-high conflict	1.45	1.61 *	2.00 ***
Low conflict-disruption	1.94 *	1.61	1.24
High conflict-disruption	1.28	1.34	1.23
Panel C: Family Transitions			
	First Sex by Age 16	Cohabitation by Age 21	Union Dissolution
Low-high conflict	1.18	0.98	1.21
High-low conflict	1.94 *	2.29 ***	2.19 ***
High-high conflict	1.76 *	1.65 *	1.01
Low conflict-disruption	2.28	1.40	0.86
High conflict-disruption	3.36 ***	2.16 **	1.66

SUMMARY

- High conflict, step & single-parent families similar in associations with child wellbeing
- Sustained high conflict associated with poorer child outcomes, independent of subsequent divorce
- Divorce associated with poorer child outcomes, whether or not preceded by conflict

CONCLUSION

- Need to account for variation within family types
 - Benefits of two married parents not shared by all
 - Conflict & parental separation both seem to matter
- Conflict does not explain or condition association between divorce & child outcomes
- Evidence points to “stress accumulation” rather than “stress relief”